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.. BUFFALO BILL'S LIFE-STAKE ..



OR, THE PLEDGED THREE

A STORY OF THE

Masked Shadower of Rocky Ridge.)

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.]

CHAPTER I.

THE WARNING.

"CODY, your life has been sworn away."

"Sir?"

"I mean what I say—you are scheduled to die."

"All men are, sooner or latter, Mr. Slade."

"True, but one whom the Black Phantoms take oath to kill is in desperate danger, Buffalo Bill."

"A threatened man is long-lived, it is said, Mr. Slade," and Buffalo Bill smiled in a confident way.

"See, here, Bill, you take this in a too light vein, when nothing could be more seri-

BUFFALO BILL GRASPED THE HAND OF EACH, SAYING IN A LOUD TONE: "I HEREBY PLEDGE
MYSELF TO BE TRUE TO THE COMPACT I NOW FORM WITH MY COMRADES!"

Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.

ous, and I am not a man to flinch from danger, or to wish my men to do so," said Alf Slade, the chief of the division on the Overland Pony Express and Stage Trail out of Julesburg, then an important station on the way.

"I do not defy death, Mr. Slade, nor make light of danger, for no one knows what risks are more than I do; but the Black Phantoms, as this band of outlaws is called, who infest the trail now, have threatened me time and again, and I yet manage to escape them, until I have come to think I am not doomed to die by their hands."

"They have threatened you before, then?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"You did not tell me this?"

"I saw no reason to do so."

"How did they threaten you?"

"Why, they have hailed me at night on the trail, and told me if I did not leave it they would kill me, and several times I have found written threats on the way, stuck up on a stick to scare me off."

"Buffalo Bill, you are the bravest fellow that ever rode this trail, and the most successful one as well, for you have never lost a package or bag of mail, and no man has been ambushed oftener."

"But I do not like this letter I have received, and so wished to warn you, and tell you that I would transfer you to another part of the line if you wish."

"Read this."

The division chief, a man of splendid nerve, iron will, and who was feared by all guilty men on the border as one who was on their path to kill or capture, handed Buffalo Bill a letter to read.

It was addressed:

"Alf Slade,

"Chief of Division,

"Overland Trail,

"Julesburg."

The address was written in a bold, educated hand, and the chief said:

"It was mailed back on the trail, as you see, and you brought it in on your last run."

"But read it aloud, Bill."

Buffalo Bill read as follows:

"Camp on the Overland.

"Alf Slade—

"Sir: It is your duty to push the Pony Riders, with their valuable freight, through these wilds, but it is necessity that causes them to become our prey."

"Perhaps I may say that their freight is our prey, the riders only when, through foolhardiness, or hope of escape, they force us to kill them to secure our living."

"One of your riders defies us continually, and under his example two others are becoming more and more determined to elude us, and resist our demands when they are halted."

"I refer to Buffalo Bill first, and Scott Kane and Hart Rathburn as the two who are following his lead, for not one of the trio have we been able to bring to a halt."

"Buffalo Bill laughs at our threats, and if you do not care to see the brave fellow die, take him off the trail, for he is surely doomed, the Black Phantoms having sworn to kill him."

"In case you are so heedless of this threat, as he has been of those made against him, let me tell you that we have planned to kill him within thirty days from the date of your reception of this communication."

"When he dies, the next blow will be upon Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane, and with the death of the three I fear you will find few Pony Riders dare ride the trail, and that we do not wish, as we would defeat our own ends of gold-getting."

"But we do wish Buffalo Bill taken off, and we'll take our chances with the other riders on the entire line."

"Refuse, and his doom is sealed, and the Black Phantoms make no idle threats."

"Yours,

"CAPTAIN KIT,

"Chief of the Black Phantoms."

"Well, Cody, what do you think of the threat?" asked Alf Slade, when the scout had read the communication.

"Captain Kit seems to be in earnest, sir."

"Yes, and he is."

"Now, I repeat, I wish you to take a run elsewhere on the line until we are able to capture this lawless band."

"This is a wish, sir?"

"Yes."

"Not a command?"

"Well, no."

"Then I shall stick to the line here, sir, and more, as the Black Phantoms have declared war openly against me, I shall return the compliment, and hunt them, and I feel that Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane will join me in the work, sir," was Buffalo Bill's response, in a tone that told Alf Slade that he meant what he said.

CHAPTER II. THE PONY RIDERS.

What a world of romance, of danger and hardships hangs about the riders of the Pony Express, who risked death on every ride through a hostile country, carrying their leather pouches filled with important letters, papers and treasure, from the end of civilization on the Atlantic to the border of it on the Pacific.

It is among these gallant men, braves all of them, I would have my reader accompany me in my trail of romance built upon the sternest of realities.

It was on the Overland trail, the line that stretched across the plains and mountains, crossing rivers, prairies, climbing hills, passing through rugged canyons, that William F. Cody, now known the world over as Buffalo Bill, was a Pony Rider, and won fame as a true hero.

There were the Pony Riders, the Overland stage coaches, with their daring drivers, the stations, fifteen and twenty miles apart, a few mining settlements, a fort here and there, a ranch or two near a station, hostile Indians by the hundred, and the lawless element living upon honest workers, all going to make up the people from whom to select those who figure in this veracious romance.

Julesburg was the headquarters of one division of the Pony Riders and stage line, and Alf Slade was the chief.

Here congregated a strange mixture of humanity, and the scene was like a guarded camp, for men held themselves in readiness to protect the property of the country from horse thieves, to fight Indians, or pursue a band of outlaws who had held up a coach or a Pony Rider.

The camp of the Pony Riders was in a picturesque spot on the river, and there dwelt Buffalo Bill in his little cabin with two comrades, the three being known as the "Star Riders of the Trail."

The two companions of Buffalo Bill were Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane, handsome, fearless fellows, and the trio had run more deadly gantlets than any men in the Pony Express.

Particularly had Buffalo Bill escaped the traps set for him by the outlaws, and though he had twice had a horse shot under him, once received a severe wound, and at other times appeared to be wholly at the mercy of his foes, he had never yielded, nor lost his treasured Express pouches, but brought them through in safety.

At the time of which I write the Pony Riders had been having a particularly hard struggle of it against a band of outlaws, known as the Black Phantoms.

These lawless men were commanded by a chief, who was as merciless as an Indian, and as cunning as a fox.

Then, too, he was one who ruled his men with military discipline, and his manner of striking his blows at the Express Riders, coaches and stations was peculiar, for he moved only at night.

It was said that his men dressed in black, and rode black horses, and this gained them their name of Black Phantoms, as well as the fact that they were seen only at night time.

Where they had their retreat no one knew outside of the band; and though the best scouts had trailed them, they had never been able to find where they hid themselves.

Several times of late the most daring raids had been made by the outlaws upon the company's stock, and both the coaches and Pony Riders had had deadly gantlets to run—Buffalo Bill escaping death, as it were, in a miraculous way, and saving the valuable freight he carried.

Then came the letter from the Black Phantoms' chief to Alf Slade, in which was the warning against Buffalo Bill, in particular.

Having declined to be sent elsewhere upon the trail to ride, and said that as the Black Phantoms had declared war against him, he would return the compliment, the daring rider made his way to his own camp, where he found his two companions awaiting him, Hart Rathburn calling out as he approached:

"Ah, Bill, glad you've come, for you brought me a letter in your run to-day I wish to read to you, for I need your advice."

CHAPTER III. THE PONY RIDER'S STORY.

"And I wish to have a talk with you and Scott, Hart," responded Buffalo Bill, as he took his seat at the little table upon which supper had been served by Scott Kane, it being his week to be the cook, for the pards took turns in the work to be done about their cabin.

"All right, Bill; what is it?"

"No; let me hear your story first, for what I have to say will keep, only it is most important, as you will see. Now fire away, Hart."

"Well, as I said, you brought me a letter, and I wish to read it to you."

"You know I came out West from a love of adventure—at least, that is the story I have told, though I know many have suspected that I had more reason for so doing than a desire to fight Indians and hunt a fortune.

"The truth is, my father was an army officer, and I was born at a frontier post, as was also my sister, three years my junior. We were raised in forts in the Southwest and West, and that accounts for my knowing so much of wild life, though a professed tenderfoot."

"At my father's death, my mother went East, and my sister was sent to boarding school, I to college, and we were supposed to be heirs to a good fortune."

"But mother married again—a California miner, who was reported to be very rich."

"He was a widower, with one son, several years older than I, and he was a most fascinating young man; just the fellow to catch a girl's eye."

"He had been educated for the army, but was forced to resign for some reason; he had then traveled for several years, until his father settled him upon a ranch in Texas; and handsome, possessing a splendid form, a fine talker, well educated, and a fine musician, he won my sister's heart, and, when my mother refused to allow her to marry him, although not related, he ran off with her, taking her from her boarding school."

"This act on his part was forgiven, but then my mother was startled to find out that her husband was not a rich man, and he had not only dissipated her fortune, which she had entrusted to him, but my sister's and mine, and he had paid his own and his son's debts with our inheritance."

"Nor was this all, for there appeared upon the scene a woman who claimed the Californian as her husband, and had proofs to support her claim."

"The shock was so great my mother never recovered from it, and in ten days after the news of how she had been deceived, and that she was left very poor, she died."

"We were from the South, you know, and there we avenge personal wrongs; so I called my stepfather to account immediately after the funeral."

"I'm a good shot, you know, and my bullet cut his heart. Then I left home and came West to seek a fortune."

"Just a year after, I had a letter from my sister, in which she told me she had just recovered from a severe attack of ill-

ness, caused by her husband's effort to kill her by slow poison.

"He was caught in the act, by the nurse, and she put the doctor on his guard, the result of which was that they set a trap for the murderer and caught him."

"He escaped by flight, carrying with him all of my mother's and sister's jewels and family plate, and then it was discovered that he had forged her name and robbed her of all the two villains—father and son—had left of the fortune, save some landed property."

"Now it turns out that this landed property is most valuable, will make both Rita and myself rich, but as all was in our stepfather's name, so placed by my mother, and he made a will before his duel with me, giving all over to his son, that son must sign certain papers before the property can be sold, as it must be, for all around it a city is springing up."

"Now Rita writes me that her fugitive husband is out here, on the Overland, as a Pony Rider, stage driver or serving in some capacity, and she is coming here to look him up."

"She says she will take charge of our cabin, for I have written her about you, Bill, and Scott, and she wishes to quietly search for Burton Bradford, for such is his name."

"She says I am to look for her within a week; and now I wish to ask your advice as to what I am to do?"

"Do? Why, what can you do, Rathburn, but receive her and aid her in her search?"

"This is no place for ladies; but you say she knows what frontier life is, so it will not surprise her."

"There is, you know, the widow of Stage Driver Drayton, who was shot, and we'll get her to come over and be a help to your sister. We'll set the boys to work to build her a nice cabin and make her comfortable while she is here, and we'll take a hand in the hunt for that villain-husband of hers, and when we find him I guess he'll sign any papers she wishes him to put his name to."

"So say I, Bill," said Scott Kane, heartily, and so it was arranged that Rita Rathburn, for Hart would not call her by her married name, was to be warmly welcomed into the Pony Riders' camp.

CHAPTER IV.

BUFFALO BILL'S PLAN.

The trio of Pony Riders presented to the reader were all men of mark.

They were not ordinary in any sense, Buffalo Bill having shown to the world in various ways just what he was.

The most striking of the three in appearance, the acknowledged best shot, rider, and man who had done the most daring deeds of any in the camp, Buffalo Bill was naturally a leader, and had been elected the captain of the Pony Riders by the consent of all.

In the station camps the men were divided into Pony Riders, stage drivers, and their assistants, stock tenders and hangers-on.

Alf Slade was chief of all, while the separate companies had their captains.

Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane were devoted to their leader, and comrade, and they were men after his own heart, for they were utterly fearless, dashing, generous-natured fellows, who won his admiration.

Both of them were handsome men, athletic in build, wore their hair long, were clean-shaven, save for their dark mustaches, and while Scout Kane dressed in the negligé style of the camps, Hart Rathburn always wore good clothes and a white silk shirt, being something of a dandy in appearance.

Hart Rathburn had told his story to his pards when his sister's letter had made known that she was coming to the Wild West.

Scott Kane's life was a mystery, and not even to his two most intimate pards had he spoken of his past.

With considerable interest both Buffalo Bill and Scott Kane had listened to all

that Rathburn had to say, and after they had expressed their intention to make his sister as comfortable as circumstances would permit, and also aid in the search for Burton Bradford, Cody said, in his quiet way:

"Now I'll tell you what I have to report, pards."

The two were at once all attention, and Buffalo Bill informed them of the news from "headquarters."

"I have just had a talk with Mr. Slade, and he wishes to put me elsewhere upon the trail."

"But why, Bill?"

"Don't go, Bill."

"I am not going, but his reason was a kind one to me, for it was on account of a letter he had received from Captain Kit, of the Black Phantoms, threatening my life if he kept me on, so he wished to transfer me on the trail."

"And the Black Phantoms are threatening you by letter, are they?"

"Yes, Hart."

"I don't wonder, as they have never been able either to catch, rob, or kill you," Scott Kane observed.

"Oh, you two were also mentioned, for they seemed to have waged war against our trio."

"Have they?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll wage war, too."

"Yes, Hart; and show them that we can play at the same game."

Buffalo Bill smiled and said:

"It is just what I knew you both would say and I so told Mr. Slade.

"Now, it seems I have kept more treasure from their grasp than any of the riders, and you two come next."

"Why the Black Phantoms threaten I do not know, instead of killing, but they do threaten us with death, hoping, I suppose, to drive us off the run, and then catch the other riders."

"But you told the chie' you would not go?"

"I did, Hart, and told him that I was sure you would be with me in this resolve."

"Right you are, Bill."

"You know what cards to gamble on, Bill."

"Well, I told him that we were here to stay, at the same time I would pledge myself to hunt down the Black Phantoms, and knew that you would be with me in the good work."

"I am."

"Command me."

"I knew what you would say, but as it will now be a man-hunt for us, we must change our present work in a measure, for I have a plan to suggest."

as one man," said Hart Rathburn, with great earnestness.

"Name your wish, Bill, and I'll guarantee that Scott and I will back you up."

"It is this:

"As Pony Riders we have but one chance to strike a blow and discover what we wish, but with you, Hart, as stage driver—and no better driver is on the Overland—and you, Scott, as stock tender, I remaining as Pony Rider, we can do a great deal of good."

"I believe you are right, Bill, but I hate to give up the saddle for the stock tender's cabin," urged Scott.

"And the coach will be dead slow for me after being a Pony Rider," Hart declared.

"Well, you will be four days in camp here with your sister, Hart, and three days on the run to Rocky Ridge and back."

"Yes, I will be glad of that, now I think of my sister's coming."

"And you, Scott, Mr. Slade will make stock tender at Rocky Ridge, and with you there, Hart driving stage, and I on my regular run, we will have a chance to pick up some news about these Black Phantoms which will enable us to turn the tables upon them."

"Do you agree?"

"I do."

"And I also."

"Then there is one thing more to be done," said Buffalo Bill, earnestly.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLEDGED PARDS.

The two comrades of Buffalo Bill knew by what he had said that he was speaking with authority.

They were well aware that Buffalo Bill had the full confidence of Alf Slade, and was trusted wholly, and when he suggested an alliance with them, to run down the Black Phantoms, making one go as stage driver, the other as stock tender, he knew just what he was about.

So it was that they listened most patiently for what more he had to say.

"I go out on my run in the morning, as you know, pards, so let us fix up our plan now while we are talking it over."

"If you take the coach, Hart, you start out day after to-morrow. And as the stock tender at the station beyond Rocky Ridge has been killed by outlaws, for Indians did not do it, I am sure you will doubtless be sent there to-morrow, Scott, so we can begin work at once."

"None too soon for me," said Scott Kane.

"I, too, am ready whenever needed, Bill," supplemented Hart Rathburn.

"Well, I'll see Mr. Slade to-night again, as soon as we have come to a thorough understanding, for you know I said that there was one thing to do first."

"Yes."

"Tell me what it is, Pard Bill."

"It is just this: to swear ourselves into a certain compact—that is, to pledge ourselves to stand by each other unto death."

"Agreed."

"So say I."

"You are both well aware that where so many men are employed there are sure to be black sheep creep in."

"We have had evidence more than once that in our midst there have been spies serving as drivers, Riders, and stockmen who were members of the outlaw band, simply ferreting out what information they could get that was of value to them."

"You bet there are such even now in our midst, Pard Bill, though we cannot just spot them."

"And lucky for them that we cannot," added Scott Kane.

"Now I wish to bind myself and you in a compact that will hold."

"Many a man will swear falsely, but even one who is steeped in crime will hardly take a false oath upon the love he bore for his mother and her honor."

"Remember, I do not have a doubt of either of you, but where I am willing to so pledge myself, I wish you to do the same; but if you have any reason why you should not, simply refuse, and that ends it."

"I have no reason, Bill, and you know my story," responded Hart Rathburn, earnestly.

"My life story you do not know, Bill, nor does Rathburn, and there is no reason just now why you should; but I am ready to take the pledge, and you will find me as true as steel, and should either of you doubt me, simply send a bullet through my heart without warning," and Scott Kane spoke with considerable feeling.

"I will," was the stern response of Buffalo Bill. "I will kill either of you the moment I am given good cause to doubt you, and you both have the same right in my case, for this is to be a pledge to bind us in honor to death if need be, and there must be no treachery, no hesitancy, no secrets unknown to each and all of us!"

"I agree."

"As I do."

At the reply of the two men, Buffalo Bill arose, and, facing his two comrades as they sat there in their cabin, said:

"Stand up!"

They did so, and, going out of the cabin, he made a quick circuit around it, to see that no one was about.

Re-entering, he said:

"There are no spies near, and now, comrades, what I ask is that you each grasp my hand and repeat after me a pledge I will utter."

Each extended his right hand, and Buffalo Bill grasped that of Hart Rathburn with his left, that of Scott Kane with his right, and looking first at one and then

Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.

the other, he said, in a low tone, but in a stern and earnest way:

"I hereby pledge myself, by the love I hold for my mother's memory, to be true to the compact I now form with my comrades, even to the sacrifice of life, if occasion demand, and should I fail, may death be my just punishment at their hands."

Distinctly as Buffalo Bill uttered the words, the two men repeated them after him, the hand of each firmly grasping his the while.

"Pards I have just as much faith in you as I believe you have in me, and my word for it that we three will be the ones to run the Black Phantoms to earth.

"There are others I would like to have join us, for it is a big work to cut out for three men, but as long as we cannot be sure of every man, we must trust no one.

"Now I will go and see Mr. Slade, and then we will know just what is before us," and Buffalo Bill left the cabin and walked rapidly over to the quarters of the division chief.

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE BREWING.

"Ah, Cody, I was just about to send for you," said Alf Slade, as the Pony Rider captain entered his cabin.

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not with the company—no, for, save that letter from Captain Kit threatening you, all goes well. Have you reconsidered your determination to remain, and come to tell me you will be transferred?"

"On the contrary, sir, I have come to tell you of a plan I have formed to hit back at the Black Phantoms.

"But how can I serve you, sir?"

"Good! When you have planned to hit back it means a great deal. But, first, to my case," and there was a shadow on the face of Alf Slade as he spoke.

"Yes, sir. That is it."

"I have got to kill a man."

"Yes, sir."

"Or he will kill me."

"Is it as bad as that, sir?"

"Yes, just that."

"Who is he?"

"Badman Bender, who is called the Boss of the Overland, but is down on the rolls of the company as Buck Bender, assistant agent of division."

"I have heard he wanted your place, sir."

"Yes, that is it, and as his secret reports to headquarters did not get me dismissed, he concluded to dismiss me himself by killing me."

"I am very sorry, sir, for he is a very bad, a dangerous fellow—the best shot, worst hand with a knife, and the strongest man on the Overland."

"So it is asserted, and he makes it his boast; but there is one man he has not yet drawn a revolver on, used a knife against, or tested his strength with, Bill."

"Who is that, sir, if it is not yourself?"

"It is you, Cody."

"I have had no quarrel with him, sir."

"No; you do not seek trouble, and he has been wise enough to seek none with you; but if he kills me I shall leave him to you, Cody."

"To me, sir?"

"Yes, for I have orders in my last mail to discharge him, and it was this that brought on the trouble between us."

"I wanted to let him down easy, so called him aside to tell him quietly my instructions."

"The superintendent said that as my assistant he could be of little use working against me, and as he had shown himself to be doing that, I should discharge him and appoint any man I deemed better in his place."

"I called him aside and he at once accused me of having backcapped him, and drew his revolver."

"You did not draw on him, sir?"

"Oh, no; I think I understand men pretty well, and how to manage them."

"He called me a coward, and dared me to fight him; but I kept my temper, read the letter from the chief aloud, and then dismissed him."

"What did he say?"

"He was taken aback, but said the letter was a put-up job."

"But, having done my duty as I saw it, I told him then that I would meet him at the starting post to-morrow, at time of arrival and departure of the riders, and fight him with what weapons he cared to select."

"Just what I expected of you, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, it was all I could do, for discipline must be enforced, you know."

"All the men in camp will be there, including those who saw and heard what passed between us."

"And what can I do, sir?"

"First, I shall now appoint you assistant in his place."

"I thank you, sir, for the honor, but I cannot accept the position."

"The pay is forty dollars more a month, as you know, and the place a good one."

"True, sir; but just now I prefer the harder work and less pay of a Pony Rider, and my reasons I will explain to you."

"First, let me say that if I am killed you must take the place as full chief of this division in my stead."

"That man is discharged, you know, but refuses to acknowledge it, and will assume my place if he kills me, and you know the chances are as much in his favor as mine, though I fear no man."

"Now you must be assistant, whatever your motives for refusing, as I know of no man here whom I can put in my place to confront Badman Bender, should I fall."

"You can do so, and he must not be left in control of the company's papers, books, money and property here, so I call upon you to take the place, if only until some one else can be sent here."

"Mr. Slade, I never was one to shirk duty, and I will do as you wish, sir, though I must tell you, should harm befall you, which I most devoutly trust will not happen, I will only keep the place until another can be sent here as division agent."

"Unless Badman Bender kills you, too, Bill, as he may me," reminded Alf Slade, with a smile.

"I must take the chances, as you do, sir; but the lightning does not strike twice in the same place, I have heard," was the quiet response of Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER VII.

BUFFALO BILL TAKES A HAND.

"You have told Badman Bender you would fight him with any weapons, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill, after a moment of thought.

"Yes."

"You are the challenged party?"

"Yes, and I wish you to serve as my second."

"Certainly, sir, for a request from my superior I regard as a command."

"Do you not wish to do so?"

"Mr. Slade, don't take that view of it, but let me give you the right one."

"I should like to hear it."

"I am a man of the West, a type of what is found on the plains and in the mountains to a certain extent; yet, though forced often, in the discharge of duty or in self-defense, to take human life, I abhor scenes of death and bloodshed."

"I believe you do, Cody, and I also do, though the saddest scenes have been forced upon me."

"But, go on."

"I have little more to say, sir, than that I serve you from a sense of duty, and not from a desire to mingle in a death-grapple any more than you do."

"I believe you, and I feel that you will serve me well."

"I will do as I deem is best in the matter, and now I ask you why you did so foolish a thing as to say you would meet him with any weapons?"

"I wished him to understand that I did not fear him, or even dread him."

"No one who knows you would think that; but, suppose he selects bowie knives, as I believe he will?"

"I must meet him."

"He is over six feet tall, weighs two hundred, is known to be a most deadly

hand with the knife, quick as a panther and strong as a buffalo bull."

"Still I must meet him if he selects knives."

"Right there I take issue with you, Mr. Slade, and as you have placed yourself in my hands, I shall say no—that you, as the challenged party, shall select the weapons, and they shall be revolvers, which will place you on even terms."

"Hardly, Bill, as he is a much larger target," suggested Alf Slade, with a smile.

"He must take the chances of size, as you would have to were the weapons bowsies."

"I fear the men may regard it as a backdown?"

"Not after I have had my say, sir, and I'll have it as your second."

"All right, Bill; I am in your hands."

"Thanks for the confidence shown in me, sir."

"But, this being settled, let us turn to the cause of my visit to you."

"Go ahead."

"I accepted the gage of war the Black Phantoms offer, and have had a talk with my two pards."

"Rathburn and Kane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"We have pledged ourselves to stand by each other in this matter, to live or die together."

"That means a great deal, Cody."

"It means that we either run the Black Phantoms to earth, or they dig our graves for us."

"But the compact is a secret, and I came to secure your help."

"You shall have it, and if I fall to-morrow you are chief here to carry out your own views."

"Yes, sir; but you will not go under, and you'll find me no false prophet."

"Now, you know that Rathburn is a man of education, and I have heard his story."

"He is a good fellow."

"Yes, sir, and he and his have known sorrow and trouble."

"His sister is coming here to visit him in his wild frontier home to try and find her villain of a husband, and we are going to make her as comfortable as possible."

"A woman in this camp, and one who must be refined and—"

"She will be all right, sir, for she was raised on the frontier, and it will help the camp, her being here."

"I do not know but what you may be right, Bill. When is she coming?"

"Within a few days, sir, and to carry out our plan, I am going to ask you to have Hart Rathburn drive the coach to Rocky Ridge and back, and let Scott Kane take the station as stock tender at Wild Water."

"But they are Pony Riders."

"True, sir; but Rathburn drives splendidly, and Kane understands the care of stock."

"But what do they say to the change?"

"They are more than willing, sir, for that is in our little game we are to play with the Black Phantoms."

"All right; I shall issue the orders tonight and have them enter upon their separate duties to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir."

"But Rathburn's sister is coming?"

"He will, as driver, be four days in camp."

"True, and you can plan as you please, and I will back you up, Cody."

"Now you had better get what rest you can, and bright and early in the morning I will be at the post to settle with Badman Bender," and, bidding his chief good-night, Buffalo Bill went to his quarters to tell his comrades that all was arranged as they had wished it to be.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECOND.

The start of the Pony Riders was made from a post in front of the general assembling quarters, where the coaches also halted, and from which they departed.

It was a large cabin, with kitchen, eating room, bar and gambling saloon attached, and there day and night gathered

Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.

the men, drivers, Pony Riders and stock tenders.

The Pony Riders were due about eight o'clock in the morning, and the one to take his pouches and continue on was always ready at his post, so that not half a minute of time was lost in the change.

Much earlier than usual the camp began to turn out the men, and all began to hasten toward the Pony Riders' post, the morning after the affair between Badman Bender and Alf Slade.

The sympathy was with the chief, for the assistant agent was feared and disliked, and as he had decided to fight with bowie knives, there were few that thought Slade had any chance with him in a personal encounter thus fought.

But all knew the pluck of the division agent, and they hoped that something might occur to save him.

The "Ban of the Overland," as Buck Bender was proved to be known, had deliberately sharpened his bowie the night before in the bar-room, and as he had remarked, had "put a razor edge on it."

That there was to be a duel to the death no one doubted, and so it was that all duties were neglected so that the men could be early upon the scene.

Buffalo Bill was to be the Pony Rider out, and an hour before starting time he was seen coming from his cabin and Alf Slade with him.

His two companions, Rathburn and Kane, were already at the post, listening to the talk of Badman Bender, who was certainly in a fighting mood.

All eyes were turned upon Slade and Buffalo Bill as they approached, the latter having evidently made some amusing remark, as the former was smiling.

"I am here to meet you as agreed, Bender," said Alf Slade, amid the breathless silence that followed the approach of the chief and his second.

"I'm here, Slade, so git ye'r knife," was the gruff response.

"I have placed myself in the hands of Assistant Division Agent William Cody, your successor, so he will arrange."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Just what he deems best."

"Wal, I'm assistant division agent here, and soon will be chief, and so acknowledge no one else."

"See here, Bender," said Buffalo Bill, "the question is just this—that we came here to fight, not talk or to argue the case of assistant agent."

"As the challenged party, Mr. Slade has the choice of weapons, and so I have selected revolvers in his behalf."

The words were coolly uttered, and every eye was upon Buffalo Bill.

As for Bender, he was seen to slightly change color, but he blurted out:

"The weapons is bowie knives, and he's a coward if he don't use them."

"The man who says Alf Slade is a coward lies, and knows he lies, and your desire to use a knife against one who is not your equal in size, strength or dexterity in handling a blade, shows where the cowardice lies."

"Men, I appeal to you if it would be a fair fight with knives between two such men?"

A perfect roar of voices shouted:

"No!"

The crowd was on the side of fair play, and Bender realized it, but said:

"He said any weapons, and I choosed knives."

"Yes, you chose the weapons you were least likely to be hurt with, but select your second and I'll arrange with him very quickly for the fight."

"Pards, I appeal to you if this is a squar' deal?"

A few voices cried out:

"Knives was agreed on, and they should be used."

"I will meet him with the bowie," said Alf Slade, impatiently.

"I say no!"

"Revolvers are the weapons you are to use with him, but if he thinks he must first have a knife fight, I will try him on!"

A perfect yell of admiration greeted this remark of Buffalo Bill, and all eyes were turned upon Bender.

But before he could reply, Alf Slade said sternly:

"My fight first, and if you are not a coward, Bender, you will meet me with revolvers."

"Yes, revolvers! revolvers!" shouted the crowd, and Bender saw that he was in a very small minority and must yield, especially as he claimed to be the best shot on the Overland trail, so he growled out:

"Revolvers goes, then, fer I'd jist as soon shoot yer, Slade, as knife yer!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUEL.

Though Badman Bender made the significant reply he did about revolvers being as acceptable as knives, and spoke in a reckless manner, there were those present who felt that he winced under the change.

But for the determined stand taken by Buffalo Bill, all knew that Slade would have fought the Ban of the Overland with knives, and with hardly a chance in a hundred of victory.

That Bender deeply felt the change of weapons was shown by the manner in which he glared at Buffalo Bill, and those who knew him best were sure that a second duel would follow quickly on the other, should Alf Slade fall.

Bender would not lose an instant in calling Buffalo Bill to account, and that it would be a duel to death with knives all who knew both men were assured.

"Well, draw and let us git at it!" called out Bender.

"No; this shall be a fair and square fight, so name your second," firmly proclaimed Buffalo Bill.

"I don't want no second!"

"See here, Bender, if you are in earnest, and not a coward, you will fight as we demand; so name your second and I will consult with him, while if you attempt any trickery you'll be shot so quick you will not know who killed you."

"Then there's a gang ag'in' me?"

"No, only all are determined to see fair play."

"Now name your friend."

Cornered as he was, Bender glanced over the crowd and called out, as his eyes fell upon a man of his stripe:

"Roper Dick, will you stand by me?"

"You bet, for Buf'ler Bill don't scare me a leetle bit."

"I cannot see why I should, for I do not understand why one man should fear another, Roper Dick," was the quiet reply.

"Well, what's ther game?"

"Revolvers are the weapons, so disarm your man, as I will mine, and each weapon will be given them when they are in position, thirty feet apart."

"At the word 'Fire!' they can draw trigger as quickly as they please and advance upon each other, firing as they do so."

"Here, toss with me for the word!" and Buffalo Bill took from his pocket a twenty-dollar gold coin he always carried as a "luck-piece," it having been coined in the year of his birth.

Tossing it in the air, as the crowd gathered around, he called out:

"Heads or tails?"

"Tails!"

"Heads win!"

"No, best two in three, and I wants a toss!" cried Bender.

"All right, Bender; best two in three, and Roper Dick tosses for you."

"No, I does myself!"

"I say no, and that settles it!"

"Then begin now!"

"I have won once."

"That don't count," urged Bender.

"All right; what do you say, Roper Dick?" and the coin was again tossed into the air.

"Heads!"

"Tails win," calmly announced the Pony Rider.

"Now it is your throw, Roper Dick."

Bender whispered something to his second as he took the coin, and Roper Dick tossed it high in air, Buffalo Bill saying, distinctly:

"Heads!"

"And heads it is!" cried a number of voices.

Buffalo Bill did not even smile, while he said:

"I have won the word, Roper Dick. Now place your man."

The distance of thirty feet was paced off, but Bender did not wish to part with his weapons, and but for the angry looks of the crowd would not have done so.

He yielded with bad grace at last, and the two men were placed in position.

Alf Slade's clean-shaven face was perfectly unmoved, but there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes, while Bender was pale and talked continually.

A man to shoot quickly on impulse, he was not one to stand up calmly and face a foe with the cool courage that Slade always exhibited.

"Are you ready?" called out Buffalo Bill, as the men stood, weapons in hand.

"Yes," answered Alf Slade, with no show of emotion.

"You bet!" cried Bender, in a voice of thunder, as if intended to intimidate.

"Fire!"

The hands went quickly up that held the weapons, and the finger on Bender's trigger must have had a convulsive twitching, for his revolver exploded before the weapon was at a level, the bullet striking the ground at one side of Slade.

Before he could fire a second shot, and quickly following his, came the report of Slade's weapon.

His aim had been true, for his bullet turned Bender half around by the force of the shock, and, staggering backward, the Ban fell his length, his revolver dropping from his hand.

But instantly he rallied, grasped it, and would have fired upon Slade, who had turned away, but a shot rang out and the weapon again fell from his hand, which dropped torn and bleeding to his side, while, with a groan, Bender sank in a heap, apparently badly wounded, if not fatally so.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER TO AVENGE.

All had heard the arrangement, that if either of the two men fell the firing was to cease, and every eye saw the quick determination of Bender, and heard his muttered words as he grasped his revolver, though on the ground.

"I'm not dead yet, Slade, and I'll lay you out, and Buffalo Bill, too."

But, though Alf Slade had his back to his enemy, and did not realize his danger, Buffalo Bill both heard and saw, and a quickly aimed shot passed through the hand that held the revolver, and Bender's treachery was thwarted.

"See if he is beyond aid, or you can help him, Stevens," ordered Alf Slade, quietly, to his stock-keeper, who was also the surgeon of the camp.

Doc Stevens, as he was more familiarly called, went over the groaning man, and, taking his hand, glanced at the wound.

"The bullet passed through the hand, but did not break a bone—only a flesh wound," he said.

Then he threw the jacket back and opened the shirt, the act revealing that the bullet from Slade's revolver had struck on a rib and, glancing upward, had entered the shoulder.

"Not dangerous.

"Come, Bender, you are not much hurt, though you'll be laid up for a month or so. Rally, man, rally!"

"Then I hain't kilt, Doc?" questioned Bender, brightening up quickly.

"Not a bit of it.

"I'll go to the quarters and fix you up, but lose no time, for you are bleeding freely."

"Then I don't die, and I gets my revenge!" muttered Bender as he was assisted to his feet and walked away toward his cabin, just as a voice called out:

"Here comes the rider!"

Afar off the Pony Rider was seen coming along the valley at rushing speed, a cloud of dust following him.

Quickly toward the post Buffalo Bill stepped, and Alf Slade followed him.

"Cody," he said, in a low, earnest voice: "You saved my life, for that man would

have killed me had he fought with knives, and again, but for your quick shot—I appreciate it, Bill."

He did not offer his hand, but his words and look meant much, more from Alf Slade than from most men.

"You will send Rathburn on the coach, sir, and Kane to Wild Waters?" asked Buffalo Bill, shrinking from being complimented or thanked.

"Yes, if you so wish, but do you still refuse the position of assistant agent, Cody?"

"Yes, sir; for just now I can do better by riding Pony Express, though I would be glad of the rest and extra pay the other would give me."

"There is a reward on the head of Captain Kit, you know, and each one of his Black Phantoms."

"True, sir; but, put it as you please, it is blood money, and that I will never touch."

"You are a strange fellow, Cody," muttered Alf Slade, and he turned to the Pony Rider, who just then dashed up.

All saw that his left arm hung limp by his side, and his face was very pale, while from his fingers crimson drops were falling.

There was no need to tell that he had been fired upon by outlaws or Indians; but, as he was helped from his saddle, he whispered faintly:

"Black Phantoms, chief."

With a convulsive movement the brave carrier fell forward, a dead man.

"God bless him! He died in the harness, and hung on to life to get his pouches in!"

"Go, Cody, but look out for foes!" commanded Alf Slade.

The leather bags were flung over the saddle of Buffalo Bill, whose fine bay horse was rearing in his eagerness to go, and, with a bound, the handsome Pony Rider threw himself upon the back of the spirited animal and was away amid a rousing cheer for him.

All watched the brave rider, going, as many feared, to his own death, perhaps, until he disappeared in the shadow of the distant hills, and then turned to the dead form of Will Hope, who had clung to life until he got in with his precious freight, arriving at the post on schedule time.

They saw that the Pony Rider had two wounds, one in the arm made by a knife thrust, which showed in what close quarters he had been, while his hand also was gashed, and a bullet had entered his body.

There was a bullet shot in the saddle, also, while one of his reins had been slashed in two by a knife, and his horse had two slight gunshot wounds, and stood panting and nervous after his long and hard run.

"The Black Phantoms did it, Will Hope said, and there is another Pony Rider to avenge," Alf Slade remarked.

He gave orders to prepare the body for burial, and then told Hart Rathburn and Scott Kane to report to his quarters in a short time, to be sent on other duty.

As he walked toward his quarters he mused to himself, half aloud:

"Yes, he saved me, no doubt of that. A remarkable man is Buffalo Bill, a wonderful man; and as he has undertaken to run down the Black Phantoms I will leave it to him and not take the move against them which I myself had intended."

CHAPTER XI. A STRANGE WARNING.

Buffalo Bill fully reaches the standard in horsemanship said to belong to one who, figuratively speaking, is "born in the saddle."

When he did not know how to ride, he does not remember, and he has been the perfection of grace and skill as an equestrian rider all his life.

It is an acknowledged fact that he can get more out of a horse than any one else, and as for human endurance in the saddle, he made records never exceeded, or indeed equaled.

His horses of the Pony Trail came soon to know him, to understand his pace, and they went along without urging.

He made himself their master first, then their good comrade, and they loved him as he did them.

Dashing along a trail that many a rider before him had dreaded for its ruggedness, and also for its dangers, Buffalo Bill's searching eyes were watching the way, well ahead.

No one knew better than he that every bush might shield a foe, behind every rock an ambushed assassin might be hiding, and canyon and timber hold a band of redskins to pounce upon him or give him a race for life.

At last, on this run, he came to a level bit of plain, with only here and there a boulder breaking the surface.

As he sped down the slope to the plain he suddenly saw a horseman ride out from behind one of those bowlders and move toward the Pony Trail.

The horseman at once riveted the eye of the Pony Rider, but only because he might be a foe, but on account of his strange appearance.

The big stone behind which he had been in hiding might conceal another horse and rider, yet it would be a close clinging that would allow of it, so, at best, Buffalo Bill would have but two to deal with, as the other sheltering rocks were hundreds of yards distant.

The horseman rode to the Pony trail and halted.

He was then all of two hundred yards from the boulder under whose cover he had lurked.

The Pony Rider was yet a quarter of a mile away, but pressing rapidly on, and having only loosened his revolver for action, for he had not drawn rein, or shown other sign of having seen the man who barred his way.

The latter was well mounted, upon a black horse, with black bridle, bit and saddle, as well.

The rider was clad in black from head to foot, he wearing a sable sombrero, and altogether presenting a very funereal appearance.

His face was so thoroughly concealed beneath a black mask, and his hands encased in gloves equally as somber in hue, that no one could have told whether he was pale-face, redskin or negro.

As the Pony Rider drew nearer, still at the same speed, and with no idea of swerving from his trail, the horseman in black raised both hands above his head, the palms turned outward to show that they grasped no weapon.

"Hello! is it a Black Phantom turned missionary, and wishing to reform? More likely it is one who is willing to sell out the gang for cash," decided Buffalo Bill.

Then he added:

"Missionary or traitor, I must look out for him."

On flew the horse at his full speed, the rider still showing no intention of drawing rein on account of the man in his trail.

A moment more and the somber horseman called out:

"Halt, Buffalo Bill, and hear what I have to say."

"See? I carry no weapons!"

The Pony Rider drew his horse to a walk, kept his other hand conveniently near his revolver butt, and advanced at a walk, while he replied:

"Talk quick, pard, I've got no time to lose."

"Do you know who I am?"

"A Black Phantom, I take it, as you have the look of one, or an undertaker."

"I am a Black Phantom, and I am here to warn you."

"Of what?"

"Of danger."

"Is that all—"

"You are booked to die."

"Maybe! but I'm warned by bullets oftener than by words."

"You must leave the Pony trail."

"Why?"

"You'll be killed if you do not."

"See here, pard Phantom, I'm in the Pony riding business for a living, and I'll not be scared off by threats."

"Not by death?"

"Why should death be more to me than to any other man?"

"You will surely be killed if you remain on the Pony trail. There are those who wish you dead, but there are others who do not wish to kill you, and that alone has saved you, for you have been in the power of the Black Phantoms when you little dreamed that you were, but have been spared."

"I guess they knew I had no treasure on that run."

"No, they spared you because there was one who did not wish you killed."

"Who is he?"

"I cannot tell."

"Or will not."

"Have it so; but do you refuse to leave the trail?"

"Yes."

"I have done my duty, so you must take the consequences."

"So be it, and only that you came to me with hands up, I'd take you in, pard, or you could get me, first, as it happened to turn out."

"We will not quarrel, Buffalo Bill, and I knew I could trust you when I placed myself in your power, for, see, I am unarmed."

"I have warned you, and you do not heed, so I have no more to say."

"Thanks for the warning, pard, but I knew what was before me when I became a Pony Rider, and threats do not scare me off. Good-by, and maybe I'll have a chance to do you a good turn some day."

"And will?" somewhat eagerly asked the masked horseman.

"Yes, certainly!"

"I may hold you to your pledge," and as the man uttered the words, Buffalo Bill dashed on.

CHAPTER XII.

ORDERED TO DUTY.

After the departure of Buffalo Bill a lull fell upon the camp.

Badman Bender had fallen from his position of Ban of the Overland and was groaning with pain over in his quarters.

Hope, the unfortunate Pony Rider killed, as he had just been able to whisper, by the Black Phantoms, lay in his cabin prepared for burial, a watch of comrades guarding his body.

Alf Slade had gone to his quarters, and his power no one dared dispute, since he had proven himself master.

Who was to be the assistant of division in place of Bender was only guesswork, but all knew the position was then vacant and would soon be filled.

That Bender would be a very dangerous foe of Alf Slade and Buffalo Bill, secretly if not openly, when he got well, seemed to be an assured belief in the minds of all in camp.

When he had gone to his quarters, Slade glanced back over the camp, which was in full view, and saw the men gathered in groups discussing what had happened.

Soon he saw Hart Rathburn coming toward his cabin, followed by Scott Kane, and the two approached together, Rathburn waiting for his comrade when he saw him going in the same direction.

Alf Slade greeted the two in his quiet way, and said:

"As I told you, I wished to see you both, and it is just as well you have come together, for I know from Buffalo Bill that you have pledged yourselves to certain work."

"Yes, sir; we are in it with Bill to stay," asserted Kane, while Rathburn remarked:

"We are pledged to work, sir, of which I believe you have been made aware."

"Yes, of your work, true; but no more, for Cody has his own plans to carry out, and which you may know, doubtless do."

"As for you, Rathburn, he wishes me to have you take the coach to go out to-morrow to Rocky Ridge."

"Yes, sir."

"Is it your wish to do so?"

"It is, Mr. Slade."

"Then report ready for duty at the starting time."

"I will, sir."

"And you, Kane, Cody desires to have at Wild Waters as stock tender."

"I am ready to go, sir, when you wish."

Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.

"The pay is much less, you know, than that of a Pony Rider."

"That's all right, sir, I'll go."

"Then go through with Rathburn on the coach to-morrow, and go as a supposed passenger."

"Yes, sir."

"What discoveries you may make in your new positions, outside of the routine of the company, you are to report to Cody."

"Yes, sir."

"If he cares to have you report to me he will so inform you."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Rathburn, I am informed that you have a sister who is coming here?"

"With your permission, of course, Mr. Slade."

"God bless her, I am more than willing, for she will aid to civilize this heathen camp by her presence."

"Yes, let her come. I will put some of the men to work preparing for her, and there are odds and ends about here I can send over to make her comfortable."

"Thank you, sir; but she is a border girl, and is used to roughing it, while she can throw a lasso, ride a horse, and shoot a revolver with any of them."

"You see, Mr. Slade, she made an unfortunate marriage, and she is coming here to look up her villain of a husband; but, she has discarded her marriage name and will come as Nita Rathburn,"

"She sings well, reads well, plays the guitar and violin, and can amuse the boys, I know, and they will not find her in their way, while she will have a chance to find out just who knows Burton Bradford out here, for that is the name of her husband. Do you know him, sir?"

The last was asked quickly, for Alf Slade was seen by both men to start and change color when the name of Burton Bradford was mentioned.

But the answer came calmly:

"Burton Bradford, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"The one I thought you referred to is named Brad Burton."

"When did you know Brad Burton, sir, for he may have twisted his name around, sir?"

"I think not—no, it is not the same man."

But both Rathburn and Kane felt sure that Alf Slade did not think as he said—that there was a suspicion the two names were borne by the same man.

"Burton Bradford was a tall, fine-looking man, sir, of thirty-two or three, with almost golden hair, blue eyes, and a long mustache," explained Rathburn, anxious to have Alf Slade say more.

But the latter shook his head, and replied:

"No, it is a similarity of names only."

"Be at your posts in the morning, and, as I understand it, the work on hand to be done is a secret to all save you three pards and myself."

"Yes, sir," and they went back to their cabin to prepare for the coming of Rita Rathburn to that wild camp in borderland.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DRIVER AND HIS PASSENGER.

"Then, from your accounts, driver, all the men out on this border are wicked?"

"Yas, miss, all of us, more or less wicked, some of us not so bad as others, but none of us saints, though there do be men here as would die for a pard, give their last cent to one as was suffering for food, kill a man for insultin' a woman, and never back down ag'in' any odds, never lie nor steal, nor—"

"Hold on, driver, for you are making a saint out of one of your sinners, for to do what you say, one must be noble and good indeed."

"But, then, they is rough with it all, miss."

"Who, for instance, is a man such as you describe—sinner, yet saint?"

"Well, miss, in the camp to which you is going, I have in mind several men sich as I speaks of."

"Now, Alf Slade, the division chief, hain't no saint, but he's true as steel to

friend or foe, generous, and his word goes fer gospil in these parts."

"Then that's Buffalo Bill."

"I have heard of him."

"I guess so, for he's done brave deeds enough to be known."

"What of him?"

"In the first place, he's as handsome as a pictur', and put up like a thoroughbred racer."

"He's peaceful as a lamb, too, but handy with a gun when it's needed, and they say—and many believes it—he has a charmed life, for no Injun or outlaw has been able to down him."

"He'd give his life for a friend, and I has heard that he came out here to ride Pony Express, where pay is big, to take care of his mother and sisters, and he sends his money home as he 'arms it."

"I has known him to sit up all night and nurse a poor devil as got shot bad and then ride Express the next day and not mind it."

"Well, how is he bad?"

"He hain't bad, only, as I said a while ago, he's be called bad because he had to kill men along in the way of duty, and so I says we is all a bad lot, take us as you pleases."

"I don't believe you, for I am sure you are not bad."

"I oughter not ter be, miss, for my good mother shaped my way right when I was a lad; but I've got hard since them days, and I gambles, drinks heavy when not drivin', and has helped along the graveyards in my small way, miss."

"That means you have killed men?"

"Had to, miss—just had to."

"In self-defense, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, miss, and when a man was trying to cheat me at cards, hold me up fer a fool, and sich—it all goes, yer know, miss, and nobody calls me Saint Matthew—you know my name is Matthew Wright—Matthew Wright fer short, always Wright if I am wrong," and the driver of the Overland coach, then rollin' along for Rocky Ridge, laughed at what he considered a good joke.

His passenger laughed, too, and replied:

"I don't believe you and your comrades are half as bad as you paint them, Driver Matt, and I am sorry you do not go on to Julesburg to see how well I will get on with these Western terrors, as you make them out."

"I am sorry, too, miss, but my run ends at Rocky Ridge, though I used to drive the Julesburg trail."

"Do you know any one in the Julesburg camps by the name of Rathburn?"

"Rathburn—Hart Rathburn?"

"Yes, Hart Rathburn?"

"Does I know him, miss?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll jist tell yer, ef it wasn't for Hart Rathburn I'd not be drivin' stage now."

"Why not?"

"Dead men don't drive coaches, miss—at least, not on earthly trails, whatever they might do in Heaven."

"Did Hart Rathburn save you from being killed?"

"I'll tell you he just did."

"Yer see, it were on this very run, and he were ridin' Pony Express as he is now."

"I had been held up by ther road-agents, and I had a rich cargo aboard."

"Thet I were going to lose all, and my life, too, were settled, for ther chief owed me a grudge fer drivin' him out of ther gold camps, and he told his men ter hang me."

"They was pleased ter do it; and, more interested in that then gittin' ther treasure, they had put a rope about my neck, when, suddenly, the tramp of many horses was heerd back on the trail, and I shouted out:

"Go on with ye'r funeral, pard!" It's only cavalry from ther fort!"

"And I thought it was, and so did they, for they ran off like scared bears, to git ther horses, he tu'k back an' started them of a mile away down the mountain."

"They had hardly got out of sight when up came the cavalry, and, Lord bless ye'r pretty face, miss, it was ther horses of ther road-agents, twenty of 'em, druv' along by Hart Rathburn, ther Pony Rider!"

"He hed suspected trouble, was on his run, was flankin' ther trail, and, seein' the'r horses, he tu'k back an' started them on ther jump ter skeer ther outlaws, and you bet he did!"

"Git on ye'r box, Matt, and drive like ther deuce!" he yelled ter me, which same I did, and saved my treasure and life, leavin' ther outlaws on foot, though they did fire at us."

"That's what Hart Rathburn did for me, miss."

"And Hart Rathburn is my own brother. I am going out to see him now," was the information which his fair passenger gave Matt Wright.

CHAPTER XIV. RITA RATHBURN.

Matt Wright was known upon the Overland as a square man and an all-around good fellow.

He had driven stage for years, and his faults could be set down as two—drinking and gambling.

Several times he had amassed considerable wealth, and had started for the home of his boyhood, but would get upon a spree, squander all, and have to return to work again.

When on duty Matt never drank. He was wont to gamble in his idle hours, but never touched liquor until a longing came over him, it seemed, which he could not resist.

Then he would give up his place, and take a few weeks off for a carousal.

"It's a weakness, I own up; but it's nature, and one can't go ag'in' nature. I'll never be different, and there are the good people at home hoping for me to come back some day a great man."

"It's a thorn in my side, but I suffers ther most," he said to his particular pards.

He had found Rita Rathburn awaiting his coach at the end of his run, and her beauty of face and form had at once struck him, while he wondered what had brought such a woman alone out into the wilds of the Far West.

"Some officer's darter goin' out to one of ther forts," was his decision regarding her.

And Rita Rathburn was beautiful indeed.

Hers was a face to see and not forget; hers a form the perfection of grace and symmetry.

She showed nobility of character, will and pluck in every feature of her expressive face, and her eyes were of the dreamy kind, yet full of fire the instant anything moved her.

Dressed in a plain gray travel'ng suit, she wore a soft hat that was very becoming, and her little hands were sheltered by gauntlet gloves.

Not a ring or ornament of any kind did she wear, but she had slung around her shoulder a leather satchel which she kept close by her, Matt Wright observed.

When she mounted to the box she did so with the easy swing of an athlete. She had asked to drive, and when she took the reins Matt's eyes opened, for he saw that she was a skillful driver.

As they went on their way, there being no one else on the coach, they became right good friends, Matt Wright and his fair passenger, and when, at last, it became known that Hart Rathburn was her brother, the driver was delighted.

Then he said, in a serious way:

"But what takes you out to Julesburg, miss?"

"To see my brother."

"I don't wonder that you wants ter see him, for he's a fine fellow; but then, it hain't no place for sich as you be, miss."

"I'll get used to it, and like it."

"I guess not. It's too tough and rough for that. I was hopin' you was a officer's daughter, out at the fort, it wouldn't be so bad; but out in a wild camp you will find it too mighty rough for a young and pretty girl like you."

Rita Rathburn flushed under the compliment, but said:

"I was born in a frontier fort, and reared amid the scenes of a wild life, so it will seem like old times to me."

"Besides, in spite of what you say of

the men out here, they are not so very bad, only rough diamonds, save a few outlawed wretches who may be beyond reclaim.

"By the way, did you ever hear of a miner out here by the name of Burton Bradford?"

"Not Burt Ford, the driver of the Overland?"

"No; but who was he?"

"Well, he was a handsome chap that drove on the Overland further to the westward. He were a gent born, but a devil ter know, and when he cut loose somebody's toes got tanned up."

"He were wild as a antelope and savage as a wildeat, and when he kilt the division chief they was goin' ter hang him, but he skipped, and I hain't heerd of him since. Sure, he wasn't your friend."

"No, the one I asked about was Burton Bradford, something the nature of the one you describe, and a handsome fellow, but I do not think he was so desperately bad as you have said this Burt Ford was."

"Well, miss, this is the place to find all kinds, and many a man out here is dodging the gallows and the jail, and, having begun wrong, they keep up their bad life when they come West."

"I'm sorry you is com'ng out here to stay, as you tells me, for you'll see sights your pretty eyes shouldn't look on."

"It's time we was meeting the Pony Rider out o' Wild Waters, miss, for he's allers on time, but late to-day."

"I hopes he hain't been held up by the Black Phantoms, for he goes in over this run at night, and they works only by night."

"And do they trouble you much, sir?"

"At times they plays the deuce with us, and the passengers and freight, but I hopes we won't see 'em to-night."

"I hope so."

"As Rita Rathburn spoke she saw that darkness was falling fast, and the driver had told her that it was yet ten miles to Wild Waters, and that Rocky Ridge was still double that distance further on."

It seemed to Rita Rathburn that, with the darkness, the trail grew worse, and Matt Wright relapsed into silence, devoting his whole attention to managing his team.

At last they entered some heavy timber, and all about them was pitchy darkness, but Matt Wright held on as though he had the eyes of a cat, and Rita Rathburn was just about to ask him how he could see to drive, when, sharply on the night air broke the command:

"Halt, Matt Wright, by command of the Black Phantoms!"

"We is done for!" moaned the driver, as he put his foot hard down upon the brake and reined in his team at the same time.

CHAPTER XV.

"BOSS BETSY."

Buffalo Bill made his ride in safety, in spite of the warning of the Black Phantom who intercepted and warned him on the trail.

He reached the end of his run, received the return pouches from the Pony Rider arriving there, and started back to Julesburg.

Reaching Julesburg on schedule time, he was complimented by Alf Slade and again offered the position of assistant chief of division.

Again it was declined, and then Alf Slade said:

"Well, Cody, we will wait and see how your plot to entrap the Black Phantoms turns out, and then, maybe, you'll accept."

"I think not, sir; but I hope to be successful in my hunt for the Phantoms."

"You saw nothing of them on your last ride?"

"Oh, yes, sir," and Buffalo Bill told of the meeting with the masked man in black who had given him the warning.

"Well, they have surely given you fair warning; but I cannot understand just why they are so anxious to get you off the trail."

"Nor I, sir; for my place could easily be filled."

"I could put on another rider, yes, for

I am one to believe that no man lives whose place cannot be filled, though it would be hard to find your match, Cody."

"But there is some secret motive, I am sure, for these Black Phantoms wishing to get rid of you."

"If they desired to kill you they could do so, but instead they warn you—try, in fact, to drive you off the trail."

"And I won't be driven," averred Buffalo Bill.

"I only wish, for your own sake, that you would heed the warning; but you know best."

"You saw Rathburn, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; met him on his coach before he reached Rocky Ridge."

"And I sent Kane with him to go on to his post at Wild Waters."

"Yes, sir; he'll be there all right by my next ride. But how is Badman Bender, sir?"

"Improving slowly, Doc Stevens tells me."

"You must look out for him, sir, when he gets around again."

Alf Slade smiled as he replied:

"How about you, Cody?"

"Oh, I'll keep an eye on him, too."

"Do so, for he is even more bitter against you than he is toward me."

"Did the boys arrange for the coming of Rathburn's sister, sir?"

"Yes, they gave her your cabin, and all chipped in to fit it up in fine style, for I sent some things over."

"I had the men put up a cabin near, and I can tell you she will have a nice home of it for this part of the country, while the camps are wild about her coming, and I suppose Rathburn will find her at Rocky Ridge on his next run, and bring her home with him."

"Yes, sir, he expects to; but I'll go and see if I can do anything else to add to her comfort, and see Boss Betsy about taking care of her."

"That has already been done. Boss Betsy is in charge of the cabin."

"She will cook for Miss Rathburn and help her all she can, but will keep her own cabin on the brook, which is not far away, you know, and continue to wash and sew for the boys, and turn an honest penny, as she calls it, and thus make her fortune, for she is getting rich, Bill, being the only woman in camp."

"I hope she won't be jealous of Miss Rathburn."

Buffalo Bill laughed, for he had seen a photograph which Hart Rathburn had, of his sister, and recalled the freckled face, red hair, and athletic form of Mrs. Bettie Drayton, whom the boys had nicknamed "Boss Betsy," from the fact that she had bossed her late husband and held the whole camp in subjection.

As Driver Drayton's wife and the only woman in camp, she had done well, in taking in "washing and mending," but, as a lone widow, she had doubled her charges and got all she asked.

Buffalo Bill was her favorite of all; his two special pards she was partial to; she stood in awe of Alf Slade, but all the rest of the camp were as mere cattle to Boss Betsy.

Ugly she certainly was; in fact, Scott Kane was wont to say that her face pained her, it was so homely; but as the one woman in camp, she was regarded as a most superior being, and she made capital out of the fact.

When Buffalo Bill left headquarters he made his way over to his own cabin, to be amazed at the change there.

A fence had been built around it, inclosing an acre of land, which was bordered by the brook on one side.

Here, by the waters, in the shelter of the trees, a rustic arbor had been erected for the coming occupant of the snug little house.

Across the front of the cabin a rude piazza had been built, and the place looked very homelike from without.

Within the place looked even more attractive, and Buffalo Bill was the more surprised at what had been done.

The men had all been determined to contribute something to adorn or be useful, and furs, birds' wings, mats, and easy

chairs were seen everywhere, with a hammock slung under the trees.

A hundred yards distant was the new and hastily erected cabin for the three pledged pards, and thither Buffalo Bill went after he had taken a look at the nest intended for Rita Rathburn.

"Ain't it grand, Bill, and won't she be comfortable?"

"I only hope she won't put on airs, for that I can't stand, and won't, from an angel."

"Drayton, big as he was, never bossed me, and no woman shall," decidedly asserted the widow.

"Don't get a chip on your shoulder to welcome her, Betsy, for I believe you will like Miss Rathburn, unless you make up your mind beforehand not to do so, and in that case I will have Hart send to Rocky Ridge and get a woman, for there are several there, you know."

This quiet remark silenced Betsy, for she was in deadly fear of a rival in the "washing and mending" monopoly which she held, and she said quickly:

"Don't you fear, Bill; I'll treat her as though she were my own child."

And Buffalo Bill felt from that moment Betsy was no longer boss!

CHAPTER XVI. ON DOUBLE DUTY.

Hart Rathburn came in on schedule time, though it was his first drive over the Overland trail on a coach box.

He had nothing to report, brought in a load of passengers and had no accident or adventure.

"You are as good a driver as you are a Pony Rider, Rathburn," was Alf Slade's comment, and this praise meant a good deal from him.

With Buffalo Bill's aid Rathburn went to work making their cabin more comfortable, and adding a few finishing touches to the dwelling place of Rita Rathburn.

It looked so cosy and homelike that all the men in the camp asked to come over and have a peep at it, and there were more volunteers than were required to clear up the grounds and add to the general trim appearance of the surroundings.

By the last mail Hart Rathburn had received word from his sister that she would arrive by the next through coach, and so he expected to meet her at Rocky Ridge; and when it became known in the camp that the Pony Rider's sister would soon be with them, every man began to brush up for the occasion.

Buffalo Bill went out to the grave of Will Hope, the Pony Rider who had been the last victim of the Black Phantoms, and placed a bunch of wild flowers upon it as a token of his regard.

"Poor Hope would have done as much for me," he said, to Hart Rathburn, who had also remembered his Pony Rider pard; in fact, the grave was simply hidden under wild flowers, the tribute of kind hearts, if rough hands.

The captain of the Pony Riders reported for duty on time, when he had to again go out on his run, and dashed away with the pouches brought in by his comrade of the trail.

The next morning Hart Rathburn mounted the box of the stage, and all the camp assembled to see him off and wish him success, for he was to bring his sister back with him, and each man was as much interested in her coming as though she was his own kin.

When Buffalo Bill arrived at Rocky Ridge he found that another Pony Rider had come to grief.

His horse had come on into camp, but riderless, and there were dust marks on his saddle that showed he had been down in the mud.

A party was ordered out at once in search of the missing courier, and the poor fellow was found dead by the side of the trail, a bullet wound in his side.

He had been fired upon, wounded, but kept his saddle until his horse, evidently rushed hard over a bit of rugged and slippery road, had fallen and rolled over him.

Unhurt, the horse had sprung to his feet and gone on, and the rider, crushed by the

fall, had lain there in the trail and breathed his last, his pouches lying near him.

With the rider dead, and miles from the station, no one else there to take his place, Buffalo Bill at once volunteered for double duty, and went on with the Express bags, a ride of eighty-five miles further.

But his form was as hard as iron and his sinews like steel; he could stand any amount of hardship, lose night after night of sleep, and so he did not shrink from the task, or even hesitate.

Leaving the party to return with the dead Pony Rider, and with a sigh for another comrade gone, Buffalo Bill dashed away upon the task he had set for himself to accomplish.

His own run was a hundred and ten miles and return, with seven changes of horses, and over the wildest, most rugged part of the long trail, while it was also the most dangerous, having been proven by far the most fatal to riders and stage drivers, both from the deeds of outlaws and Indians.

To this ride of two hundred and twenty miles, with the return considered, he was to add eighty-five more going, and as much returning, making in all, without rest, a continuous ride of three hundred and ninety miles, with fifteen changes of horses.*

As half of the distance was to be covered at night, and the trail led over mountain and plain, through canyon and valley, across streams and through a land haunted with danger, the reader can see that the daring captain of the Pony Riders had cut out for himself a most herculean task.

Nor was this to be all that Buffalo Bill had to face upon this memorable ride, for he was flying along on his run to Wild Waters when he drew rein with a suddenness that threw his horse upon his haunches, while a whistle of surprise was given at a discovery he had made by one quick glance at the trail he was pursuing.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PONY CAPTAIN'S DISCOVERY.

The discovery made by Buffalo Bill, as he was speeding along the Pony trail, was a number of tracks crossing it.

They were the tracks of shod horses, going toward a ridge, and some dozen in number.

Coming from the mountains, they could but be foes, and the animals being shod showed that they were not redskins.

Black Phantoms, then, they must be, and their way led to the stage trail a mile to the right, for just there the Pony trail was making a cut to save several miles.

The stage trail passed through a gap in the mountains, that led into a valley, and it must be that the outlaws were on their way to head off the coach and hold it up.

Of course, it was important to push on with the Pony Express matter, but Buffalo Bill had been told that the incoming stage to Rocky Ridge was bearing a rich freight in funds to pay off the Pony Riders, drivers and other men employed by the company.

This meant a large sum of money, and it was being sent through first, while it was given out that the company's paymaster was to come by the next coach, so, if held up, he would have nothing to be robbed of.

This secret had been divulged to Buffalo Bill by the agent at Rocky Ridge.

But the Pony Rider captain knew that there was another valuable freight on the coming coach—Rita Rathburn.

At least her letter to her brother said she would come by that coach.

Matt Wright, the driver, Buffalo Bill knew well and liked.

If the Pony Express matter was somewhat delayed, he must try to save the company's money, Rita Rathburn and Matt Wright.

How to do it was the question.

First he would examine the situation.

So he turned off the beaten Pony trail and rode on after the one that he could

readily follow and which was so fresh he knew it had been made within a couple of hours.

As he drew near the stage trail he went more cautiously.

Fortunately, he was sheltered by heavy timber. Approaching as near as he dared to the trail, he dismounted, hitched his horse, and went along on foot.

He walked with great caution, for he knew his danger if he came upon the outlaws suddenly.

He had gone but a short distance when he beheld horses feeding ahead.

They were staked out, their bridles off, but saddles on.

Where were their riders?

There were just twelve horses, and Buffalo Bill saw that one was a pack animal. The men must be in the gap.

The coach, however, was not due for a couple of hours or more, so Cody began to climb the hill.

He decided to reach the range, look over in the gap, discover just where the outlaws were ambushed, then go back to his horse, ride around by the Pony trail, head the coach off, give warning, and have Matt Wright leave the stage, mount his passenger or passengers on the horses, and take the Pony trail and flank the ambushed Black Phantoms in the gap, carrying his treasure with him.

It was a clever scheme and would save the treasure and passengers, and a party could be sent out to fight the outlaws.

But when Buffalo Bill crept cautiously to the edge of the precipice and looked over, to his surprise he did not see the outlaws in ambush.

He searched all about, and, failing to find them, he began to look for a position from which he could view the trail running through the valley.

At last he got a place from which to scan the long, narrow, but pretty valley, through which the stage trail wound its way.

"Aha! there they are!"

His vision had discerned a group of men in the edge of a pretty grove of pines in the valley.

The stage trail ran through the center of this grove, and the bandits had preferred to ambush it there, as, if there was a guard with it, they would be on the watch for foes at the gap, but not at the pines in the valley, a mile, nearly, away from the range.

They had left their horses beyond the range and gone to the pines on foot, and the Pony Rider captain muttered:

"I'll try another game, and one that Hart Rathburn once played—that is, capture their horses, and then warn Matt of his danger."

"But I suppose they left a guard with their horses, so I must go slow."

With this he retraced his way down the ridge, and after some difficulty obtained a view of the horses of the outlaws.

As he was looking the situation carefully over, he beheld a man lying on a blanket near the horses, and he muttered:

"There is the guard, and I hope he is asleep."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR MASTERY.

Buffalo Bill calmly looked the matter over as he stood on the ridge gazing at the outlaws' horses and their guard, apparently asleep on his post.

If he had been in any doubt as to who the riders of those horses were, this had been dispelled by noting that each animal was jet black, as were also their saddles.

"I have thus far lost just twenty-five minutes, and if on time, the stage will be at the pines in two hours at furthest.

"Night is coming on, and I think my best plan would be to take the Pony trail back to Wild Waters, after I have captured yonder guard and the horses, and get the aid of Scott Kane and his assistant, with the horses there, for a dozen outlaws will not be so easy to drive away from a treasure they deem within their grasp.

"By hard riding I can reach Wild Waters in half an hour, and an hour can

get us back behind the coach and make the outlaws believe we are a guard of cavalry.

"Now for it!"

With this Buffalo Bill rapidly descended the ridge, and when he got into the valley he knew he had to take his chances of being discovered.

There might be two guards over the horses, or, if not, the one might get up from his blanket and discover him.

The horses, seeing him, might neigh, or otherwise arouse the guard.

The Pony Riders rode as lightly armed as possible, and Buffalo Bill carried only one revolver.

The guard, or guards, as the case might be, would surely have rifles.

This placed the Pony Rider at a great disadvantage.

Aroused, through whatever means, the guard, being armed with a rifle, would be able to open upon Buffalo Bill before the latter was within range.

"I must make strategy serve me if he discovers me," decided the wary rider, as he left the range and boldly walked toward the scattering timber where the recumbent form of the guard was visible.

There was no need of caution now, only so much as to make no sound to arouse the guard, so Buffalo Bill walked erect and with a firm step, his hand ready to grasp his revolver.

His Express pouches he had concealed near where he left his horse.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the recumbent form on the blanket, and he saw now that it was clothed in black.

The sable slouch hat lay by him, and the face was masked.

When within a hundred feet of the man, Buffalo Bill paused, and looked all about to see if there was another guard.

To his relief he saw none.

As he continued to advance one of the horses, as often is the case, discovered him, gave a startled snort, and trotted to the end of his stake rope.

This caused the others to throw up their heads and sound an alarm.

And more, it brought the sleeping guard to his feet with a bound.

He rubbed his eyes and gazed hurriedly about him.

It was at long range for a revolver, but Buffalo Bill would not fire until the guard showed fight; he would try strategy to get nearer.

Suddenly the guard discovered the prowler, and the discovery was a startling one, for he uttered a cry of alarm and sprang with great leaps toward a tree, some rods away, where Buffalo Bill now saw a rifle leaning.

The guard must not reach that rifle, for the terms would be too unequal if he did.

So Buffalo Bill fired a quick shot at the running man.

The bullet hit his leg and knocked him down, but the man was upon his feet in an instant, and made another attempt to spring for the rifle, but his foot would not allow of it, and seizing his revolver from his belt he now turned upon the Pony Rider.

Buffalo Bill had hastened forward the moment the guard had fallen, and when the man arose to his feet and faced him with his revolver, the two were but twenty paces apart.

Buffalo Bill did not fire, for, as has been said, he never took human life unless it was forced upon him, and he preferred now to have a prisoner upon his hands than a dead man.

"Hands up, pard, or I fire," he shouted.

The response was a shout, and the bullet came dangerously near the Pony Rider's head.

The shot was answered with surprising quickness, and the aim was true, for the Black Phantom fell in a heap on the ground.

The duel had ended.

CHAPTER XIX.

THREE MEN TO THE RESCUE.

Though Buffalo Bill saw his man fall, and had perfect confidence in his own aim, he approached cautiously.

*This ride of Buffalo Bill on the Pony Express is on record.—The Author.

He had seen men supposed to be dead prove dangerous very suddenly.

It had been his wish not to kill the man, to wound and take him prisoner.

But the Black Phantom had proven so dangerous he did not dare to trust him too far, so had fired to bring him down.

Still he had hoped not to have him die at once, for he might get a confession from the outlaw—a thing greatly to be desired.

Thus far most of the Black Phantoms brought down had been killed outright, though there had been several exceptions that proved how well the band was organized and disciplined.

One man, wounded seriously, when his foes approached him, turned his last shot upon himself, thus ending his own life.

Another had died with sealed lips, refusing to tell on his comrades, though threatened with torture.

A third, captured unhurt, had been hanged, refusing to the last to betray the band to save his life.

Still, Buffalo Bill, though knowing all this, had hoped that one man might do what another would refuse, and had been anxious to keep from killing the guard if he could do so.

When he reached the man he turned him over upon his back and took from his face the black mask.

He was not dead.

"Well, comrade, I am sorry I had to fire to kill," said the Pony Rider, with real sympathy in his tone.

He saw that the man was conscious, for he looked Cody straight in the eye.

Faintly came the words:

"I would have killed you."

"Who are you?"

"A Black Phantom."

"Where are your comrades?"

"I will not tell."

"Will you die and make no confession to remove the guilt from your conscience?"

"Yes."

"You are dying."

"I know it."

"I wish I could help you."

"You cannot."

Buffalo Bill hardly knew what to do.

He must not let the coach be held up, and yet he hated to leave the dying outlaw.

But he felt his duty was to the company he served rather than to the man who had warred against it, though he was now dying.

Night was coming on, and the outlaws in the pines might have heard the shots, though he did not think so.

"Pard, I will make you as comfortable here as I can and leave you, but later will send aid to you, for I must go on my way."

"I am sorry, but it must be so."

Buffalo Bill had hoped that the man would try and detain him, seek to make some confession, after all; instead, he merely said:

"Go; do not mind me. I have brought this upon myself."

"I am very, very sorry."

"So am I, but regrets are vain now." Buffalo Bill put out his hand.

The outlaw had not strength to raise his, but tried to do so.

The scout stooped and grasped his, and then placed him in as comfortable a position as he could.

Near him he left his revolver, to keep off a coyote.

Then he again grasped his hand and in silence turned away.

Taking the rifle of the outlaw from the tree, Buffalo Bill then mounted the best of the horses, tied the others two by two, and drove them back on the trail he had come.

Reaching his own horse, he took his saddle, Express pouches, and at once set the horses into a rapid run.

This was kept up until the Pony trail was reached.

Then he hitched the horses of the Phantoms, and upon his own animal went speeding along at a tremendous pace back to Wild Waters.

It was dark now, but the horse knew the trail, and in a short while he had cov-

ered the distance and dashed up to the station of Wild Waters, where Scott Kane was stock tender.

The latter came out, rifle in hand, much surprised at the sudden re-appearance. His comrade was just behind him.

"Ho, Bill! you back?"

"Yes, and not a moment to lose. You and Roper Dick arm yourselves; you, Scott, sling your bugle; get my horse in the corral and come with me, for we can save Matt Wright's coach from a band of Black Phantoms lying in ambush."

"Don't lose a minute, for we cannot spare the time. Matt carries treasure, and you know Hart Rathburn's sister is along on this run."

The two men did not take a minute to arm themselves, and while they got the horses together, thirty in number, Buffalo Bill saddled the two they were to ride.

In just six minutes the three men were off to the rescue of the coach, the horses' hoofs echoing loudly as they sped along.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIDERLESS TROOP.

As when riding the Pony Express, Buffalo Bill felt that he was going against time.

He fully realized that he had to act quickly, that if the coach was held up by the Black Phantoms Matt Wright might be killed, perhaps some of the passengers, if any other than Rita Rathburn, and the treasure taken and people robbed.

The outlaws worked quickly and well when at their lawless deeds, and would very soon carry out their bold intention to rob, perhaps to kill, so he and his comrades had not a moment to lose.

The horses of the outlaws were found where Buffalo Bill had left them, and with those brought from the station, were driven on at a run, forming a large cavalcade.

They were urged on along the Pony trail for miles, and after nearly an hour of hard riding, came to where it once more entered the stage trail.

There a short halt was made, and Buffalo Bill, dismounting, quickly lighted a match, and, with Scott Kane, searched the ground thoroughly.

They were not long in finding what they sought, for there were the fresh tracks of the wheels and horses.

The stage had passed, just how long before they could only guess.

They had no time to lose.

It might be then nearing the ambuscade of the Black Phantoms in the pines.

"Now, pards, I have not been able to tell you just why I came for you, and what I wish," said Buffalo Bill.

"Start the horses on ahead, and we'll ride together, and I'll give you my plan."

"All right, pard Bill, we are with you, whatever is to be done," said Scott Kane.

"Yes, shout and we obeys," added Roper Dick, Scott Kane's assistant at the station, and a good all-around fellow, handy with a gun, lariat, or whatever he was told to do.

The horses were started ahead once more, on the jump, but now tied with lariats, four abreast, as the stage trail allowed of their so going.

Thus they looked like a company of cavalry riding in fours, and were thirty-six in number, riderless animals.

"Pards, I came upon a trail crossing the Pony path near Rocky Ridge, and I investigated.

"There are just eleven Black Phantoms ambushed in Park Valley, in the grove of pines near the center."

"They left their horses the other side of the gap at Rocky Ridge, and with one guard, so I corralled them, and that accounts for the animals I have along."

"And the guard, Bill?" asked Kane.

"We had a couple of shots, and I left him badly wounded, and you must see to him, Scott, for I go on at once on my trail as soon as we have blocked the game of the Phantoms."

"Eleven, you say?" asked Mustang Jim.

"Yes, and we are three; but we will make them believe we are half a hundred, with the horses we have."

"That is why I asked Scott to bring his cornet, for he can give a bugle call or two, and we will stampede the Phantoms, whether they have already held up the coach or not."

"When we get near the pine grove we can charge at the call of the bugle, and riding in front of our troop of horses, we can open fire, but be careful not to fire toward the coach."

"All we wish is to stampede the Phantoms, and then Matt can drive on and you and Jim Scott can accompany him."

"As you will have the outlaws' horses, they will be on foot, and make their escape as best they can."

"When you get through the gap look up the man I wounded, and carry him in the coach to the station, but I think you will find him dead, as he was failing fast when I left."

"Now, on to the rescue, and if we can bring down a Phantom or two, it is that many less to have to hang some day," and Buffalo Bill urged his horse to a still fleeter pace.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLACK PHANTOMS' DEMAND.

As he drove along on his way with Rita Rathburn on the box with him, Matt Wright had not once forgotten the danger of the trail.

He had only hoped that he would get through on that run without a halt, for he realized that a hold-up by the Black Phantoms would prove a great shock to his fair passenger.

On every side his eyes were roving, striving to pierce the dark shadows, and his ears were turned to catch the slightest suspicious sound.

He knew that the Black Phantoms were growing bolder of late, that they were making a daring fight for gold.

Aware that he was carrying a large sum of money and knowing the plot for the paymaster to come by the next coach, and so try to prevent being robbed, Matt Wright hoped that the scheme might work successfully.

But he was doubtful, and the gap in Rocky Ridge was what he feared.

If he got through there without a hold-up, then he had hopes of going through all right.

It was then a surprise to him when he heard the command to halt, "by order of the Black Phantoms," in the pines in the valley, a mile before he reached the gap.

Not for a moment, daring as he was, would he have then attempted to dash through, as he had several times done, for fear of bringing a shot that might wound or kill his fair passenger on the box.

He knew that in the darkness it could not be seen that she was a woman, and he did not know that the Black Phantoms would care if she was.

When the challenge came he at once understood what was expected of him, and never in his life had he halted with greater promptness.

"Sh! Don't say a word to let 'em know you is a woman, or they might want yer fer ransom," he warningly whispered.

But his foot was on the brake, his strong hands had drawn hard on the lines, and the team had come to a quick halt.

In the darkness the shadowy forms of the outlaws were seen.

Approaching the coach on the side on which the driver was, was the tall form of the chief, apparently.

"Good-evening, Mr. Wright," he said, pleasantly, as he halted and looked up at the driver, his mask being seen even in the darkness.

"I doesn't call it a good evening when I'm held up by a lot o' men who ought ter be hanged," boldly responded Matt.

"Don't get cross, for it will do no good, and you know we must live."

"By stealin' other folks' goods; but yer'll git nothin' fer ye'r trouble this time, so take that fer a pointer."

"I beg to differ with you," replied the outlaw leader.

"Yes, we does differ, fer if I was like you, I'd be cutthroat and thief too."

"Don't get cross, I say, Matt, but tell

me what freight and passengers you carry," and the leader seemed unmoved by the insulting words of the driver.

"I has one passenger, no freight to speak of, and you'll get nothing to-night, for the paymaster you hoped to find didn't come on this run."

"You both lie and tell the truth, Matt, for the paymaster is not along, though I happen to know that his money is, for I take it the lady passenger you have, and who is bound to some one of the forts, is carrying it through for him."

"You is away off this time."

"Seeing will be believing."

"I expected you would have an escort, and so I concluded to hold you up here, instead of in the gap, for we could let you go by if there was a guard with you, and our presence not be suspected here."

"Our horses are in hiding beyond the gap, and so we will ride on there with you. But, come, I want that treasure you carry, and as this lady is doubtless an officer's wife, she must have baggage of value along, jewels and other things worth taking, while a good ransom would be paid for her, so I shall hold her a captive and make the demand for money to buy her release."

"You see, this is a good night for me, Mr. Wright, though you do not seem to enjoy it."

The tone of the outlaw leader was politely sarcastic, but every word he uttered fell heavily upon the heart of both Matt Wright and Rita Rathburn.

She realized that she was at their mercy—that she would be taken a prisoner and held for ransom.

Such an act would destroy all her plans, take all of her money to buy her freedom, and cause her no end of unhappiness, even if she was not made to suffer more deeply still.

For once her brave heart sank with dread at what was before her.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BUGLE CALL.

"See here, Cap'n Kit, fer that's what they calls yer, as yer don't dare let yer own name be known, I wants ter ask yer, as a man, ef yer has any manhood left in yer, does yer intend ter take this leddy a prisoner jist fer ther leetle gold yer'd git out o' it?" asked Matt Wright, indignantly.

"I am out for gold, Matt Wright, by fair or foul means, and if it can be gotten from a woman I will have it."

"Yes, she will be my prisoner until she can buy her freedom, so that is all there is of it," was the emphasized reply of the road-agent chief.

"Well, I has heered many hard things said of yer, but I'm blamed ef yer hain't meaner than any man knows."

"Come, no more talk, or I'll silence your tongue forever."

"You've got treasure aboard, as I know, and your passenger is worth more, and I want and will have all I can get."

"Hand over that money-box, Matt Wright, and you, miss, must dismount and go with me."

"Oh, sir, will not you take my word for any sum I am able to pay you for my ransom?"

"No; possession is nine points of the law, and you will have to remain a hostage until the money is paid."

"Come, Wright, delay a minute longer, and I certainly will kill you. Out with that treasure, for I know you have it along."

There was nothing for it but to obey, and none knew it better than brave Matt Wright.

The passenger would be held, the coach robbed of its treasure, and delay would cause the death of the driver.

But just as the outlaws gathered more closely around the coach, there came to the ears of Matt Wright a sound that made him start.

He was elevated above the others, and he heard the fall of many hoofs coming along at a swinging pace.

He did not wish the outlaws to hear the welcome sound until the rescuers were

nearer, for he was sure that a company of soldiers must be near.

So Matt talked in a loud tone, called out to his horses, as though they were restive, and whispered to Rita Rathburn:

"Cry like ther deuce, miss, fer help is near, and I don't want 'em to hear it!"

Rita Rathburn had not heard the sound, but she obeyed, and burst into feigned tears and sobs, enough to touch a heart of stone.

"Say, pard outlaw cap'n, I s'pose I has ter yield ter ye'r demand—Ho! thar', you critters!—as long as I can't help myself, and I'll tell yer that you've made a rich haul, and—ho, thar! what's ther matter with you critters?—oh, glory!"

The last two words were uttered with a yell, for suddenly was heard, back on the trail, the wild call of a bugle.

It was a terrible surprise to the Phantoms, for now they all heard the quick fall of many hoofs, almost upon them, and the notes of the bugle rose wilder and wilder.

"Form fours! Charge!" shouted a commanding voice, and the frightened outlaws waited for no more.

They were on foot, a mile from where they had left their horses; the sound of hoofs indicated a whole troop of cavalry coming! Resistance would be madness; the only chance for safety would be flight and hiding in the pines.

In his mad rage the chief fired twice upward.

Had his purpose been to kill Matt Wright, and was the second shot for the woman as well?

Whatever his motive, he came very near killing both Rita Rathburn and the driver, for one bullet passed through her hat, the other grazed the head of Matt Wright, inflicting a slight wound in the scalp.

The driver threw his revolver forward to return the fire, but checked himself, as he feared a volley would be returned from the flying outlaws that might kill Rita. He did not think of himself.

Another moment, and every outlaw had disappeared in the shadows of the pines on the right, for in that direction they could keep under cover across the valley, reach the hills, and get to the spot where they had left their horses, and which they had no idea they would not find there.

Then up dashed the rescuers, and, to his utter amazement, Matt Wright, instead of beholding a troop of cavalry, beheld a number of riderless horses and but three men!

The cavalcade came to a halt by the coach, and, in the darkness, Matt Wright could not recognize the three rescuers, but one said quickly:

"Drive on, Matt, for they have no horses to pursue you with. Kane will explain. I must be off. Good-night!"

The speaker wheeled his horse and dashed away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOUND DEAD.

"That's Buffalo Bill, or my ears is deceivin' me."

So shouted Matt Wright, as the Pony Rider dashed away on the trail to make up the two hours and more he had lost in the rescue of the coach.

"Yes, pard Matt, it's Buffalo Bill; but, drive on, for Roper Dick and these horses are all we have to fight the outlaws with should they return."

"I'll tell you all about it at the station," said Scott Kane.

"I'm with yer," cried Matt Wright, and he sent his team ahead, the two men following, with their horses in lead.

"We is rescued, miss," said the driver, exultantly, as he drove on.

"Yes, and it appears to have been a most remarkable rescue," replied Rita Rathburn.

"Just like Buffalo Bill does things, miss."

"And the man who rode away so quickly was my brother's friend, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, miss."

"He said but little, and did not even give us a chance to thank him."

"That's his way, miss."

"He is modest, like all brave men."

"Just as modest as a school gal, miss."

"But, why did he leave?"

"You see, he is ridin' Pony Express, and war behind on his time."

"He, like as not, found the Black Phantoms was out for blood and went back and got Scott Kane and played it on them, for they fooled me, as I thought it were a troop of cavalry."

"There was a bugler there, and a good one."

"That's Kane, for he plays ther cornet, and he plays it good, too."

"We'll know it all when we gits to ther station, which Kane has charge of now."

On through the valley drove Matt, keeping his horses at a brisk pace and talking as he went.

He was delighted at the fact that the money-box was saved, and that Rita Rathburn had not been made a prisoner to the Black Phantoms.

"Kane is one of ye'r brother's pards, miss, for he and Buffalo Bill and pard Rathburn lives tergether, as I told yer."

"Bill, he is still ridin' Pony Express, but Kane is stock tender now at Wild Waters, which we is coming to, and ye'r brother takes the coach on when I leaves it at Rocky Ridge."

"I shall be glad to meet my brother's friends, and to thank them for their great service to me to-night."

"I don't jist know why Buffalo Bill are ridin' on this run to-night, for he belongs on ther trail from Wild Waters on to Julesburg, but, maybe, ther regular rider hev been kilt."

"Poor fellows, they are in constant dread of death, as you also are, Mr. Wright."

"Now, don't call me mister, miss, for it don't go out here. I'm plain Matt Wright, and don't claim no titles."

"All right; we are good enough friends, I think, so I will call you Matt."

"Matt goes, miss. Yas, Scott, what is it?" and Matt Wright answered a hail from Kane.

"Halt after passing through the gap, for I've got a wounded man, or a dead one, for you to carry through."

"O. K. I'll freight him through, living or dead, if he's your friend, pard Kane."

On through the gap the coach rolled, and beyond, in the scattering timber, Matt halted.

It was bright starlight, and the clouds had rolled away, so the night was not very dark.

Scott Kane and Roper Dick at once tied the drove of horses, and, mounted upon their own animals, began the search for the wounded outlaw.

Following Buffalo Bill's directions, it was not long before Scott Kane found the spot, and he saw the form lying beneath the tree where Cody had left him.

"Come, Dick, here he is," he called out to Roper Dick, who was a hundred yards distant, and the driver heard his call and waited.

"Say, pard, are you all right?" asked Kane, as he approached the silent Phantom.

No reply came, and, stepping forward, he bent over the motionless form.

"Dead!" he muttered, as he placed his hand upon the head, now with the icy chill of death upon it.

"Ho, Matt, drive over here, please."

Matt did so, halting the coach near.

Kane had wrapped the body in the blanket, and called out:

"Pard Matt, he's dead, and I'm going to ask you to carry the body on to the station, and I'll bury it."

"Certain."

"Who is he?"

"A Black Phantom."

"Good! He's all right. Who kilt him?"

"Buffalo Bill, and left him here wounded, while he came for us to help save the coach from the Black Phantoms, who held you up."

"But I'll explain when I get to the station, for now we must get away from here, as the Phantoms will come after their horses."

The blanket-enveloped form was placed in the coach, and at a brisk pace Matt drove on once more, the two men following with their horses.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MEETING.

Wild Waters was reached without further trouble, and the six fresh horses left in the corral were brought out and replaced the team that had just come in.

Leaving Roper Dick to see to the changing of the horses, Scott Kane started to explain to Matt just how he had been rescued, when the latter said:

"Wait and tell it to my passenger, too, for I've got ther sweetest leetle leddy along you ever seen, and it's Hart Rathburn's sister. Come over to ther coach and I'll interdooce yer."

"I am glad, indeed, you were able to serve Hart's sister, and we knew she was expected through on your coach, Matt, and Buffalo Bill was that more anxious to save you."

"And yer did," and approaching the coach, Matt continued:

"Miss, this is one o' ye'r brother's pards, Scott Kane, whom I spoke to you about, and he's proud ter meet yer as I is ter interdooce him."

"Indeed, I am glad to meet you, Miss Rathburn, and your brother will take you on from Rocky Ridge."

Rita swung herself down from the box with the easy motion of an athlete, and, grasping the Pony Rider's hand, said warmly:

"You have nobly served me, Mr. Kane, and from my heart I thank you and your brave friend, whom I wish also to know."

"Roper Dick will soon be here, miss, but we were a means to an end, for Buffalo Bill deserves all the credit."

"I have no doubt that he also deserves my thanks, and I will prove my appreciation when I see him."

"He deserves all, Miss Rathburn, for he is doing double duty."

"He went through, Matt, on this run, as the rider was killed, and so is taking the ride on."

"An hour after he left he was back again, had me get the horses up, and we started at full speed to flank the valley and come in behind you on the trail."

"It seems Bill discovered the Phantoms' trail, followed it, found their horses under a guard, wounded him, left him there, and, finding where the band was ambushed, rode back for us to help him."

"We had the horses of the Phantoms also, for Buffalo Bill had captured them, and so we played cavalry and stampeded your enemies."

"Bill told me to carry my cornet along, and when the outlaws were off he went on his run, and a hard ride he'll have of it, enough to kill any other man."

"He'll make it all right, never fear, and git in on time, I'll bet big money," said Matt Wright, with enthusiasm.

"I'll never bet against Buffalo Bill, Matt; but here comes Roper Dick and Miss Rathburn wishes to meet him."

Roper Dick was duly presented, and Rita Rathburn won his heart by warmly grasping his hand and thanking him.

The fresh team was now ready, and as the body of the dead outlaw had been removed from the coach, Scott Kane suggested that Rita Rathburn ride inside and get what sleep she could.

"No, indeed! I'll not desert my good comrade, Matt," she replied. "I will ride on the box as before," and, with a good-bye, she swung herself up with the same ease with which she had descended.

Matt was delighted at her decision, and away the coach started once more to make a rapid drive to Rocky Ridge and make up for the time that had been lost through the hold-up.

It was midnight when the coach drew rein at the Overland tavern, in Rocky Ridge, and standing in the light of the open doorway was revealed the tall form of Hart Rathburn.

"There is my brother," cried Rita. "I never saw him in that garb before, but I know that it is he."

"Yes, miss, it's your brother, and he's just a lookin' fer you with all his eyes."

As the coach halted Hart Rathburn stood by its side, and in another moment he had welcomed his sister.

"Hart!"

"Rita!"

It was all they said, but the heart of each was full, and Matt Wright felt a lump in his throat and brushed tears from his eyes which he could not force back.

As Rita turned she saw those tears glistening in the light and said:

"You have brought me safely through, good friend, and you know how I appreciate it."

Matt could not reply, but wrung the tiny hand in his palm in silence.

"Yes, Matt, old pard, you have brought my sister to me and I must thank you; but did you have any trouble?"

"Did we, Hart?"

"Well, I kinder reckon we did, and ef it hedn't been fer Buffalo Bill—God bless him!—we'd not be here, at least ye'r sister wouldn't, and somethin' I carries, too, and you has ter take on through, so look out fer trouble ye'rself, as ye'r knows them Phantoms, when they is dead sure thar' is gold ter git, makes two attempts at it."

"That is so, Matt, and thanks for the warning."

"You have the paymaster's box along?"

"Yas, and ye'r sister, so look out for trouble," was the whispered warning.

CHAPTER XXV.

RITA'S STORY.

Hart Rathburn slightly changed color at the warning of Matt Wright.

He recalled that the Black Phantoms, when pretty sure that a coach or a Pony Rider carried a valuable freight, were almost certain to make two, if not three, attempts to get the booty before it got to its destination.

They would divide their band in two, or three parties, and strike at as many points on the trail, so if one missed another might be more successful.

That they knew of the paymaster's strong box being aboard was certain from what Matt Wright told him of his hold-up, and a second, if not a third, effort to rob the coach he felt morally sure would be attempted.

For himself he did not fear, but then he had his sister along, and after a talk with Matt he decided to leave her at Rocky Ridge until the next run of his coach.

But when this plan was told to her, Rita Rathburn would not hear of it.

"I will not dodge any danger you have to face, Hart, and you should know me better than to ask me to do so."

"I go through with you on this run, or take the consequences," was the bold reply of Rita Rathburn.

Hart knew his sister, and said no more. He knew she would go.

Supper was had at Rocky Ridge, a fresh team put to the coach, and Rita mounted the box by the side of her brother.

Matt Wright said good-by with a sad cadence in his voice, and saw the coach drive away with a foreboding of evil.

"I don't think they'll hold her up afore daylight, but somehow I'm dead sure ther Phantoms is sure ter do it."

"I only wishes I could do something to help Hart and his sister out, but I don't just see what it can be."

With this he sighed and went to his quarters.

Although anxious as to the result, Hart Rathburn did not wish to show it to his sister, and as soon as they were well on the way, said, cheerily:

"Well, sister, I'm more than happy to see you, though it is not the best place I have to welcome you."

"Ah, Hart, I shall be happy in being with you, for you are all that I have to care for now, and you well know I know what it is to rough it."

"Yes, you can adapt yourself to circumstances as well as any one I ever know; but you will have a pleasant cabin, the boys will give you a hearty welcome, the one woman in camp, Betsy the Boss, as she loves to be called, will look to your comfort, and four days of the week I will be in Julesburg."

"Then I will have no cause to complain, for I have my guitar and violin along, my

music, a lot of books and plenty of fishing tackle and ammunition, not to speak of my work basket full of needles, thread and darning cotton, so I can keep busy and will have to be a mother to the camp."

"A pretty mother you will be, sis."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Oh, I did not mean it that way, though you are pretty—yes, beautiful, more so than ever; but you are nothing but a child in years—"

"I am twenty-four."

"Yes, and even in your few years have known so much of sorrow and trouble; but tell me, Rita, just why you came West?"

"I will, for you might as well know it now as later."

"Yes, I am anxious to know all."

"Well, you are not aware of all that has happened, so I will go back to your—pardon me for reviving bitter memories, but I must—"

"Don't mind me, sis."

"Your fatal duel with our step-father, I meant."

"Yes."

"Mother, poor mother, had given him full control of everything, and thus he got all our property in his possession."

"Mother's death—"

"He killed her!"

"Yes, her heart was broken, I knew, and she felt that by her marriage with him, and that in him she had ruined us."

"You killed him, and that made his son his heir, and then began my greatest suffering, for my husband was determined to get rid of me, and, as you know, sought to slowly poison me to death."

"The discovery of his crime sent him a fugitive out of the land, and you were also a wanderer here in the West."

"In settling up the estate it was discovered that there was only a little money for me, but the furniture and other personal effects I had the right to sell, and did so."

"Then our attorney told me that what else there was I could not touch without my husband's signature, so that, little as it was, it must remain in abeyance."

"One day my lawyer came to me and asked regarding some land father had bought in the West long years ago."

"I told him we had always considered it worthless, but mother had paid taxes upon it as long as she lived, as it was father's urgent request she should do so."

"The lawyer said that the tax bill had just been sent and was for a large sum, ten times the amount heretofore paid."

"So he wrote out to an attorney near there and discovered that three railroads had centered on the land, a city was springing up near by, and the property was becoming most valuable."

"High prices were offered for lots on our land, and as we had hundreds of acres there, we would realize a large fortune by the sale."

"But then came the trouble in the shape of my husband's signature, which must be had; he was a fugitive from justice, and so must be found."

"In this unfortunate predicament there was nothing to be done but find Burton Bradford."

"And you have come out here to do so?"

"I have."

"Have you any proof of his being here?"

"I have!" was the decisive reply of Rita Rathburn.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SECOND TIME.

Hart Rathburn was silent after his sister's assertion that she had proof that her wicked husband was out on the frontier.

He drove quietly along managing his team well, and picking his way over rough places in the trail in spite of the darkness, for he knew the road well, having once ridden Pony Express between Julesburg and Rocky Ridge.

At last Rita broke the silence by saying:

"Yes, I put a detective on his track, and he discovered that he was last seen at Leavenworth, and came further west with a wagon train bound to Denver."

"To Denver, however, he did not go, but came to the Overland, and it was said became a stage driver under a man by the name of Alf Slade."

"Alf Slade is our division chief, Rita, and I know every driver for three hundred miles each side of his headquarters."

"Well, he may have given up stage driving for other work, but I am sure he is out here, for he was last heard of on the Overland near Julesburg."

"There is nothing he could be doing out here that I would not have heard of him."

"He might have changed his name, and doubtless has."

"Ah! that may be so; but I would know him at a glance."

"He would know you, Hart, equally as quick."

"True."

"You have not changed your name, and so he would hear it, and, what is more, if he did he would be on the watch for you, that you did not see and recognize him."

"By growing his beard and dressing in rough clothes, wearing his hair long and assuming another name, you might not recognize him, especially as you would not suspect his being here."

"Very true."

"But, granting that he is here, what is your intention regarding him?"

"In the first place, I do not intend that he shall kill you, as he vowed to do when you killed his father, in that duel."

"I will simply have to be on the watch for an assassin, sis."

"I will do better, for I will find the man myself."

"And then?"

"I will see that when I find him I have him in my power."

"Yes, for he would kill you as quickly as he would me, as you have had reason to know."

"I have, indeed."

"Once the man fascinated me, and I was as his very slave."

"I deemed it love, but it was influence simply that made me marry him."

"My eyes were soon opened, and it made another being out of me; but I tried to make the best of my mistake, to put up with my ignoble bargain."

"You know what followed, Hart, and that he and his father sent our mother to her grave and made us, as we believe, almost beggars."

"Now it turns out we are rich, but to get our own we must find Burton Bradford and make terms with him."

"He must not be killed, for he has information and papers my attorney must have."

"We can get him in our power and with threats of sending him East for trial can bring him to terms."

"Now, Hart, Burton Bradford must be found, and when he is, leave him to me!"

"All right, Rita, for I know you can manage the whole affair well."

"I will put Buffalo Bill and Scott Kane, my pledged pards, upon the search, also, and if he is out here we will find him."

"I will likewise have a talk with Chief Slade, and see if he can give me any clew."

"Do all you can, for the man must be found."

"It must soon be generally known that I am here with you, and then, remembering his former power over me, I believe he will look me up, if only to force money from me."

"I only hope that he is in hard luck and will find me."

"Don't let him make a fool of you as before, sis."

"Trust me for that, Hart. I was a fool once, but a sad experience has taught me sound sense, and I am iron-hearted now."

Thus they talked, until the gray dawn of morning appeared and Hart Rathburn gave a sigh of relief as another spot where the Phantoms had held up coaches and Pony Riders was passed in safety.

The relay stations were reached on time, and the stock tender at each one reported no sign of the outlaws had been seen.

"If we pass through the valley ahead in safety, sister, I will feel pretty sure of

going through all right," said Hart, as they drove away from the relay station where they had had breakfast.

The sun rose as they left the station, and in spite of her night ride Rita Rathburn looked very beautiful, and Hart could not refrain from saying:

"You have certainly become more beautiful, sis, in spite of your sorrows, for you look as fresh as a dewdrop. But, here is the valley, and—"

"Halt!"

"The Black Phantoms bar your way!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

HART RATHBURN'S BOLD RUSE.

In spite of being on his guard and half-expecting he would be again held up on the trail, Hart Rathburn started at the bold command, and his face whitened.

He seemed to realize at a glance that the coach would be robbed, his sister be taken as a hostage for ransom, and that no help whatever was near.

The coach had just descended from a ridge into a large valley, broken by timber, rocks, and a stream.

There were innumerable places where an ambush could be held, and the presence of foes never suspected until they drove upon them.

Now the trail ran through a growth of thick timber, with boulders upon either side, and the one who had given the command to halt rode suddenly into the trail, his rifle in hand.

He was mounted upon a black horse, his costume was black, and his face was covered with the sable mask of the Phantoms.

Hart Rathburn was surprised at being halted by the Black Phantoms in the daytime. It was something that he had not heard of; but he recalled that the delay for breakfast for his sister put him nearly an hour behind, and had he come right on without a stop at the last station, longer than for a changing of teams, it would have still been dark when he reached the valley.

The Black Phantoms had been expecting him sooner, and in spite of his arriving at their ambush after daybreak, they were not to be cheated out of their prey, and so broke their rule and held him up in the daytime.

Suddenly an idea flashed across the ready mind of Hart Rathburn, and as he drew rein and put his foot upon the brake to halt, he said in a whisper:

"Let me manage this, sis, only help me out."

"I will."

He dared not disobey the command to halt, for well he knew the mercilessness of the Black Phantoms, so he halted quickly and, with a sarcastic laugh, said:

"Oh, I don't mind halting, pard, though I'm already behind from having met your chief, and if you can find any pickings after he and his coyotes have gone through the outfit, you are welcome to all you get."

"The chief halted you, then?" quickly asked the horseman.

"You bet he did."

"Where?"

"In Pleasant Park."

"When?"

"A little after nightfall."

"What did he get?"

"Enough to make Alf Slade put a force out to run down and hang every coyote or you."

"Good! Then he got the box?"

"No; you can have the strong box if you want it; for after he has had his hand in it you may be sure it is as clean picked as a deer bone after a coyote has had his dinner on it."

"How much did he get?"

"The paymaster's money to pay off the whole division for two months was in the box; but you'll have to make your head wolf tell you how much it was."

"Good!"

"Anything else?"

"Here's the box."

"I ask you if he got anything else?"

"Now you know if there was anything else of value he got it. Why, he even made this lady pay a big ransom, he was

so mean, robbing her of things that can do him no good."

"Well, we risk our life to get gold, and we want all we can get."

"And got it, unless there might be something your brother hyenas left, so look over the baggage if you want to."

"No, for I know the chief too well to feel that he has left anything of value; but I think if he had held the lady there for ransom he could have gotten more."

"He thought so at first, but concluded if he took General Burbank's daughter captive the army would make it a little too hot for him, so he concluded to rob her instead."

"Ah! it is Miss Burbank, is it?" and the masked outlaw glanced fixedly at Rita, who sat quietly listening to her brother's clever and bold ruse to escape, and wondering if he would be successful.

"Well, sir outlaw, what interest have you in me?" asked Rita, undaunted.

"None; as the chief got your valuables; and if he did not dare hold you for ransom, it is more than I care to take the responsibility of doing, Miss Burbank."

"You are wise, for if you know General Burbank at all, you must understand that he would call out every soldier on this frontier to run down the captors of his daughter, where he has not the power to act against you for your other lawless deeds."

"Oh, yes, I know him, and I'll let you severely alone."

"Already broke your rules in holding me up in the daytime, haven't you?" asked Hart Rathburn.

"You were due here before dawn, and I waited."

"Yes; your chief put me behind. Don't want the box, eh, for it's no use to me?"

"No! Drive on!"

"Thank you for nothing," and Hart Rathburn drove on.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STILL A DREAD.

Only a few rods had Hart Rathburn driven, when he heard another call to halt.

He obeyed, though his heart sank within him.

"I say, are you not Hart Rathburn?" called out the outlaw.

"I am."

"You are a Pony Rider?"

"I was."

"Why did you give it up?"

"To drive stage."

"Got frightened off the Pony trail, I suppose?"

"About that. You fellows halt Pony Riders with a bullet, but give stage drivers a chance."

"Where is Buffalo Bill?"

"Riding Pony."

"On what run?"

"Same."

"He is not."

"Well, he's doing a double run now, because you coyotes killed a Pony Rider."

"You've got another pard?"

"Heaps of 'em."

"One in particular, for I know there were three of you Pony Rider pards."

"Maybe you mean Scott Kane?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Where is he?"

"He was paid off, and took coach eastward my other run, and will go home, if he don't lose all his money gambling in Rocky Ridge; then he'll be looking for another job on the Overland, I take it."

"You three pards had better take my advice and give up Pony riding."

"I have, without consulting you, for advice is dirt cheap."

"When does Buffalo Bill come through on the back trail?"

"Don't know."

"Or won't tell?"

"I told you he was riding double, and I don't know now what his run will be."

"I would like to see him," and the man looked toward his half dozen companions half a hundred yards back on the trail, and spoke in a low tone, as though he did not wish to be heard by them.

"If you have any message to send him I'll take it."

"Tell him," and the outlaw lowered his voice, "tell him that one who wishes him well tells him to leave the Overland Trail, whether he rides Pony Express, drives coach, or tends stock."

"I'll tell him."

"I mean this, and I send him this advice because I do not wish to see him killed."

"All right. I'll tell him, but let me say right here you can't scare Buffalo Bill off the Pony trail."

"I don't wish to scare him, and yet I do, too."

"Well, he is not built that way. He don't heed warnings and don't frighten a little bit at threats."

"He will continue to ride Pony, and he'll go through when others fail, for he is one of the few born for luck in this world, and he can defy Fate, and I don't believe the lead is mined for a bullet to kill him, though I do think the hemp is grown to hang you."

"Still, if you feel friendly toward Cody, and mean well in your warning, I will tell him what you say, only give me your name."

"My own name I have disgraced, and the one I now bear he would not know; but tell him the warning comes from a friend, though outlaw I am."

"Drive on!"

There was a bitterness in the tone and words that struck both Hart Rathburn and his sister, and without a word the team was started ahead once more upon the trail, and at a very lively pace, too, for Hart had no desire to be again halted.

Looking back, and seeing that the Black Phantoms had disappeared from the trail, Hart Rathburn gave a sigh of relief, and Rita said:

"Well, that agony is over!"

"Thank Heaven it is, sis."

Hart spoke with great fervor, and Rita added:

"Brother, you are a trump! I never saw a bolder and better game played in a desperate situation."

"The idea struck me to try it, and it went all right, sis, or rather, Miss Burbank!" and Hart laughed.

"Well, I saw what you were after, but my heart was in my mouth, and I could hardly speak."

"Why, Hart, you really tried to force the strong box on the outlaw."

"And he wouldn't take it."

"No; but will find out his mistake when he meets that wicked chief of his."

"I would not be surprised if Captain Kit killed him when he discovers how he allowed the treasure to slip through his fingers, for it would be just like him."

"Do you think he was honest in his wishing to warn your friend, Buffalo Bill, brother?"

"Yes, I really believe that he was."

"Why should he be?"

"Doubtless he is some man for whom Cody has done a service in some way, for there are many who owe him for favors done, and of all kinds."

"What a remarkable man your friend Buffalo Bill must be, Hart."

"He is."

"I would so like to see him."

"You did see him, back on the trail, and—"

"No; it was too dark to see anything or anybody."

"Oh, yes, I forgot; but Bill will be in Julesburg, if he has luck, almost as soon as we get there, for it would not surprise me if he rides the whole run at full speed."

"If he had not taken the double run he would be in camp to receive us."

"Then you think there is no more danger now of our being held up again by the Black Phantoms?"

"They never have struck a coach nearer Julesburg than the valley we have just left, though they have held up Pony Riders."

"I have some dread of the Black Canyon ahead, though they may have put out only two bands, yet have at times had three in ambush."

"Where is this Black Canyon?"

"Half a dozen miles ahead, sis, and a bad place to be caught in," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SILENT WARNING.

When he had accomplished the good work of saving the coach from robbery, and Rita Rathburn from capture by the Black Phantoms, Buffalo Bill, with a word to his pard, Scott Kane, went off as silently as a ghost.

He put spurs to his horse, for he not only had a hard ride to make, a double duty to him, but there was much time to make up, lost in his halting to render good service.

On, on he went, no longer having any dread for the coach, or its fair passenger, for he knew how well his plan had worked.

Station after station he came to, a rapid change of horses was made, and, still bearing the valuable Express bags, he sped on through the night.

He urged his horses to their greatest speed, for he was determined to make up for lost time if horseflesh and human endurance could do it.

It was just midnight when he reached the end of his run, and he felt that he had accomplished a big task, though he was still behind time.

He had ridden from Julesburg to Rocky Ridge, and thence on, and had delayed over two hours on the way in his rescue of the coach, while he had also ridden back on the trail to Wild Waters, and thence on with his two comrades from there.

Without a moment's more delay than was necessary, the gallant Pony Rider was off on his return, and the horses were kept at the same tremendous speed from station to station.

Wild Waters was reached and there a halt of a few minutes was made for Scott Kane to tell him what had followed his rescue.

Then he was off again, and Rocky Ridge was reached just ten minutes behind the time of the Pony Rider who had ridden that run.

Mounted upon a fresh horse he was away again as soon as he had taken a small repast, and just as the sun peered over the mountains he said, with grim satisfaction:

"I will catch the coach before it reaches Julesburg, and go in ahead of time in spite of my double run."

He had hardly uttered the words when, in glancing far ahead on the trail, his keen eyes caught sight of a bit of white paper fluttering in the air.

A closer look, as he approached at full speed, showed that a string was stretched across the trail, and in the center of it, about as high as his breast when mounted, was fastened a slip of paper.

He at once drew rein, took the paper from the string, cutting the latter from the trees to which it was tied on either side of the trail.

The paper was addressed upon one side to

"W. F. CODY, Pony Rider."

Upon the other, written in a good hand with a pencil, was the following, which Buffalo Bill read aloud, seated in his saddle, while his horse stood quiet, apparently glad of the rest.

"The coach, driven by your pard, Hart Rathburn, has been twice halted, first by Captain Kit, who robbed it and the lady passenger."

"It was halted near here half an hour ago, but as there was nothing to get, it was allowed to go on."

"A third party of the Black Phantoms are in Black Canyon, and the leader of that band will surely hold the lady for ransom, so try your best to warn Rathburn of what he may expect, and save her from a captivity that will be cruel."

"If you reach here too late to overtake and warn the coach, you are a brave man and might attempt a rescue, for there will be but five Black Phantoms in the third

band, but a bold dash might stampede them, and you have taken chances with greater odds, as I happen to know."

"This is a silent but well-intended warning from one who can only sign the name of

"FRIEND."

Buffalo Bill did not hesitate an instant after reading this, but put spurs to his horse and dashed on at a swifter pace than before.

He had ridden about a mile when he suddenly wheeled out of the trail into what seemed only a deer path.

"I know what I'll do," he muttered, in a determined way, as he sped along.

"Fortunately, I know this country well, and though I cannot overtake the coach before it gets into Black Canyon, I can get to the cliffs overhanging the spot where I know the Phantoms will be in ambush, and once there, when they hold Rathburn up, maybe I will have a chance to chip in."

"But I must ride for it."

Having decided upon what he would do, Buffalo Bill pressed his horse harder and harder, muttering from time to time in a sympathetic way to the straining animal.

"I must do it, old horse, for your speed alone can help now."

At last Buffalo Bill wheeled suddenly out of the deer trail, threw his rein over a limb, seized his Express pouches, and began to climb up the steep hillside on foot.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BLACK CANYON.

Hart Rathburn came to the Black Canyon with the feeling of a man who would be content if he passed through it in safety.

Some presentiment of evil seemed to have impressed him, and yet he hoped that he would have no trouble there.

If his sister was not along—if he only did not carry the paymaster's money, he would gladly take all chances which he might personally have to run.

The Black Canyon was a pass through a ridge of dark-colored rock running from mountain to mountain. The ridge was not over a quarter of a mile in width, and had precipitous sides, causing it to have the appearance of an immense wall.

The canyon, or pass, was like a split in the ridge, not over a hundred feet wide at its greatest width, and on each side were huge pieces of rocks which had split off and fallen from the cliffs.

There were also clumps of stunted pines growing in the canyon, and with the rocks they formed the very best places for an ambush for horses and men.

The cliff on either side rose from forty to sixty feet, and there were stories told that the Black Canyon had been the scene of many an Indian massacre, when one tribe ambushed another, and it was known that a wagon train of emigrants had all been slain there by redskins.

That there were graves and many human bones scattered through the canyon appeared proof of its having been a scene fatal to many, whether Indians or whites.

The Pony Riders and stage drivers had always hated the spot, feeling a superstitious dread of its haunting memories, but as it was a steep mountain climb and descent to flank it, the trail could not be changed, though several miles could have been saved had the coaches been able to go the nearer way.

"Here is the Black Canyon, Rita," said Hart Rathburn, as he drove into the deadly pass.

"It appears well named, for the rocks on either side are almost black."

"Yes, and its history is a black one as well."

"Why, those look like human bones, Hart—they are, for see those two skulls!"

"Yes, there are many of those to be seen here."

"Why do you Riders not bury them?"

"Buffalo Bill suggested doing so once, but there was a great howl raised, for some are known to be whites, others redskins of hostile tribes to each other, and to bury them together, the Indians would become enraged, while the men in the

camps swear they will not put redskin and pale face, good and bad, together."

"And so they remain unburied, though human beings."

"Yes, Rita, and we Pony Riders call it Golgotha, that is, the Place of Skulls."

Rita Rathburn looked sadly about her, and then remarked:

"The Pony Riders have well named the place, but it is in this canyon that you dreaded that the Black Phantoms might again hold us up."

"Yes."

"And what then?"

"I can only play the same bluff game, Rita, as I did last time, only stating that we have twice before passed through the hands of the Phantoms, and what could these last expect to get—By Jove! I was right—see there!"

As Hart Rathburn spoke there stepped out from behind large rocks, upon either side of the trail, forms clad in black and masked.

There were two of them, and they were on foot, but as Hart glanced quickly behind him he beheld two horsemen ride out into view.

Then he again looked ahead, and his eyes fell upon another horseman riding out from behind a rock from whence had come one of the men on foot.

The latter halted directly in the trail and held up his hand in silence.

Hart Rathburn drove on until his leaders were almost up with the man whose horse barred their way, and then he drew rein, at the same time breaking out into a loud laugh.

"You seem amused," said the horseman.

"I am."

"I don't see the joke, and I guess you won't think it so funny when I tell you that you are in the hands of the Black Phantoms."

"You are the third gang of Blacky Coyotes that have halted me since last night."

"Ah! then you have been halted before?"

"I rather think I have."

"I thought you were a new man, but you are Hart Rathburn, the Pony Rider."

"Right! go up head!"

"Gone to driving coach?"

"Right again."

"Who halted you?"

Captain Kit and his gang; then, fifteen miles back, one of his lieutenants and his coyotes, and now you and your wolves!"

"What did Captain Kit get?"

"Just take a look and see if you can find anything of value that escaped him."

"I will, for I've had more experience than he has at this business, if he is my chief, and need only look at that young lady to see that he has overlooked capturing a treasure," was the bold response.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AS THOUGH FROM THE CLOUDS.

The reply of the leader of the Black Phantoms was a decided rebuff and disappointment to Hart Rathburn.

He had hoped, as before, his suggestion of a search of the coach would be sure proof that there was nothing to find of value.

But the remark that Captain Kit had overlooked making a capture of Rita to hold for ransom but carried out the words of the leader of the second band of outlaws, that if halted again the same consideration would not be shown the fair passenger that had been thus far.

"What do you mean?" asked Hart, pretending not to understand his words.

"I mean that Captain Kit failed to see that there was a treasure to be gained for the ransom of that young lady."

"Do you mean that you would dare hold the daughter of the general commanding this department a prisoner until she was ransomed?"

"Why not? And as I have a grudge against General Burbank, I can now even up matters by holding you for ransom, Miss Burbank."

"I warn you that the insult will be avenged," spoke Rita, indignantly.

"It is catching before hanging, young

lady, and with you in my possession I can make my own terms."

"You are doing what neither Captain Kit nor his other lieutenant dared do."

"I always had the name of doing what other men dare not attempt."

"You must go with me, Miss Burbank, so get what clothing you care to from your trunks and I will make a bundle of it all, and carry it along."

"Come, dismount!"

He spoke sternly, and with his voice raised as though to terrorize the woman.

"I refuse to go!" was the firm rejoinder of Rita.

"Then I shall have to use force."

"Dismount from that coach or I will have my men get up there and bind you securely, for I stand no trifling, now!"

Hart Rathburn dropped his hand upon his revolver.

It was evident from his look that he intended to defy all odds and resist his sister's capture.

She saw this as a glance and quickly said:

"I will go, and you will find that I will be ransomed with lead and steel instead of gold, sir outlaw!"

The man laughed rudely, and Rita whispered quickly:

"It must be, Hart."

"You and your friend Buffalo Bill can rescue me."

"It would be madness to resist, for you would be shot down mercilessly, and I would still be a prisoner."

"It is true, but it breaks my heart to see them take you, sis," and the deep voice quivered with emotion.

"Come, I dislike waiting, Miss Burbank," rudely said the outlaw leader, and he held up his hand as though to aid her down from the box.

But there came a sharp report, and with a yell of amazement and pain from the outlaw leader's lips, his right hand fell to his side, the blood dripping from it.

Ere the surprised and terrified Black Phantoms could move, a second shot came from the same direction and the other outlaw, who had dismounted and stood near his chief, fell dead in his tracks.

"Hands up, all of you!" cried a voice that seemed to come from the clouds, as had the shots.

But the three yet mounted men had no idea of surrender. Their foe could not be seen, so was certainly not down in the canyon. They put spurs to their horses and turned in flight, for their wounded leader was bounding for cover behind the huge boulder where his horse stood.

But Hart Rathburn was at work now, and a shot from his revolver brought down one of the horses, the rider falling heavily.

Dazed though he was by the fall, the man sprang to his feet and started to run, when a second shot from the driver's revolver brought him down again.

Springing from his box, Hart Rathburn sought to get a shot at the wounded chief, but the ruffian had quickly gained the shelter of the boulder, and, reaching his horse, was flying away under cover of the pines, while a wild war-cry rang through the Black Canyon.

"That is Buffalo Bill's war-cry!" yelled Hart Rathburn, and, as he uttered the words, the tall form of the Pony Rider captain appeared upon the top of the cliff.

There he stood, his broad sombrero in his left hand, his revolver in the right, and his eyes peering down into the canyon and watching the rapid flight of the leader and his two men as they spurred like mad through the gap to seek safety through the speed of their horses.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MERCY TO A FOE.

"What a grand picture!"

It was Rita Rathburn that spoke, and her gaze was fastened upon the Pony Rider.

There he stood upon the cliff, looking after the fugitive outlaws, and he presented a picturesque appearance, indeed.

As she looked she saw him step back from the cliff, but he reappeared in a minute, with a coiled lariat in his hand, a weapon he never went without.

One end of it he had made fast to a small pine, and the other he dropped over into the canyon.

It reached within a few feet.

Swinging himself fearlessly over the edge, he began the descent, hand under hand, and as his feet touched the ground, Hart Rathburn and his sister stood there to receive him.

"Ho, Pard Cody! I owe you another favor to the many already due, for you do not know what a great service you have rendered," and Hart Rathburn grasped the hand of his pledged pard, who answered:

"I can guess that you were in trouble."

"But let me make you known to my sister. Rita, this is the man of whom you have heard me so often speak—Buffalo Bill I will call him, for that name explains all."

"I also owe debts of gratitude to my brother's friend I can never repay," said Rita Rathburn, feelingly, as she held out her hand.

"Let me tell you how glad I am to welcome you to the Wild West, Miss Rathburn, for we needed your presence in our life here."

"Thank you, Mr. Cody—"

"I am Bill to my best pals, Miss Rathburn, and you are to be one."

"Then Bill it shall be. But let me thank you for last night's rescue, and now again for having been saved from captivity."

"I am glad I was so fortunate; but, Hart, the man you shot is not dead and we must see what we can do for him. Then I'll have to ride for it, for I am behind, you know."

"In a good cause, though; but you are ever merciful to think of that wounded outlaw, for I had forgotten him."

"Now, tell me how you came to be upon the cliff."

"Read this letter, and it will explain, for it caused me to turn off the trail when I found that I could not overtake you."

"It was tied in the center of a string, stretched across the trail."

"Now to see if that wounded man is beyond air."

Handing the written warning to Hart Rathburn, Buffalo Bill walked rapidly to where the outlaw had fallen whom the driver had fired upon.

His horse lay near, dead, but the outlaw was groaning with pain.

Taking the mask from his face, Buffalo Bill, to his surprise, beheld the face of a handsome youth of apparently not more than twenty.

"Well, young pard, I have come to see what I can do for you," he said, kindly.

"Did you shoot me?"

"No, but my pard did."

"You are Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, so called."

"You saved that lady?"

"Well, my coming stamped your cut-throats, it seemed."

"I am glad, for I would have been very sorry to see her made a captive to such men."

"Am I mortally wounded?"

The experience of Buffalo Bill with wounds had made him something of a surgeon, and he answered:

"I will have a look at your wound."

The shirt was opened at the wound and was found to be upon the right side, just under the shoulder, but how serious the Pony Rider could not determine.

Hart Rathburn and his sister had approached and stood gazing upon the wounded outlaw, and awaiting the verdict of the Pony Rider.

"It is beyond me to say how bad the wound is, but from your appearance I do not believe it fatal."

"We have a doctor in the camp, and must take you to him."

"The men will hang me."

"You will perish here."

"I would rather be left here to die than be taken to the camp to hang."

The Pony Rider was silent a moment, and then said:

"You shall not be hanged, my word for it."

"Then I will go. You word, Cody, is enough!"

"Come, Hart, let us put him in the coach and make him as comfortable as can be."

"I will ride in the coach with him, and see that he is cared for," said Rita, struck with the fine face of the stricken young outlaw.

"Do so, sis," and turning to Buffalo Bill, Hart continued:

"I will pick my way and not shake him up more than I have to."

"And it was you, miss, that I was helping to make a captive—you, sir, I was aiding to rob," said the outlaw, sadly.

"Never mind that now," was the hearty reply of Hart Rathburn; and with Buffalo Bill, he lifted the form of the youth and carried it to the coach.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ARRIVAL.

"I will ride in the coach with him and help all I can," announced Rita Rathburn, touched by the words of the wounded outlaw, and no longer, in his helpless condition, feeling any bitterness toward him.

The outlaw was placed in the coach, the cushions so arranged as to prevent him from being thrown off the seat, and Rita insisted that she would ride inside.

Then the dead road-agent was placed on top of the coach, the trappings taken from the slain horse and thrown up there also, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Now I must leave you, Hart, and I'm trying hard to get in on time in spite of my double run, and having been delayed so, though, as you say, in a good cause."

"I don't wish to discourage you, Bill, but you can never make it on schedule time, and the wonder is you are able to ride at all."

Buffalo Bill smiled in a confident way as he responded:

"You know the cut-off over the ridge saves me a long distance, Hart, and by hard riding I may make it. So, here goes!"

"Will see you in Julesburg!"

With this he waved his hand to his pard, raised his sombrero to Rita, and went up the lariat hand over hand with the ease of a sailor.

Drawing the lariat up after him, he untied it from the tree, and went off at a run along the ridge to where he had left his horse.

Rita watched him until he disappeared, and then said:

"I do not wonder, Hart, that you admire your friend, for he is a most remarkable man—a truly wonderful man."

"Now, let us go on, for if we can save this poor fellow, we must do so."

"Save him for the gallows, if we do," muttered Hart.

"No, Buffalo Bill said not."

"If he can save him from the men at Julesburg I will believe in miracles."

"Would they hang a wounded man, brother?"

"Some would, some wouldn't. But you must remember what we have suffered at the hands of the outlaws, who war for gold alone."

"They have killed our riders, our drivers and stock tenders without mercy, and have run off our stock and shot and robbed passengers, until we are as bitter toward them as toward rattlesnakes and wolves."

"But this man is wounded—is, in fact, a mere boy," placated Rita.

"True, the men may wait until he recovers from his wound, but I doubt it, sister mine."

"You will do all you can to protect him?"

"Oh, yes; I am Buffalo Bill's pledged pard, and I'll stand by him in all he says and does; but, he will have to yield to the crowd, if they take a notion to hang the young fellow."

Rita Rathburn said no more, but began to feel that it was indeed a wild life they led upon the Overland trail.

As the young outlaw urged that she should not ride in the coach with him, telling her frankly that she was too good, he too sinful to be near her, and Hart had placed him so he could not fall off the seat, she mounted the box once more with her brother and then the team went on.

It did not take Rita long to see that, whatever her brother's hatred might be for the outlaws, he was showing a kindness to the one now at his mercy, for he avoided every stone in the trail, turned out for the ruts, and drove at a slower pace when he came to a bit of rugged road.

Rita talked much of Buffalo Bill as they drove along, and asked many questions that showed an interest in the man to whom she owed so much.

When they came to a stream she asked her brother to halt, and a tin cup of water was given the wounded outlaw, who appreciated the kindness.

"I don't think the wound is fatal, Rita, for he seems no worse in spite of the shaking up I cannot help giving him," the brother said, after a halt to give the wounded man a drink.

The last relay station was passed, the horses were changed for fresh ones, and Hart told Rita that it was but fifteen miles from there in to Julesburg, and the trail was fairly good.

To his inquiry as to his having seen Buffalo Bill, the stock tender said that he had not yet passed.

"Is there any other trail he could have taken, for I have driven quite slow, and he should have passed us."

"Well, he could have switched off a few miles back, but he would have to ride the same horse near thirty miles and swim the river. It would be saving some six miles—it's the old Pony trail, you know."

"I never went that way; but if Bill comes this way, tell him we are going slow, and that our prisoner is yet alive."

"He won't be long after you get to Julesburg," was the significant assurance of the stock tender.

Driving on again, as the trail was comparatively good, Hart Rathburn went at a swifter pace, and at last said:

"Now, Rita, you'll soon see Julesburg and be at home."

He struck up a brisker gait, and in a few minutes more the coach came in sight of the camps.

There they beheld a large crowd, evidently gathered to receive them, and Hart said:

"You'll get a Wild Western welcome, Rita."

"And there is Buffalo Bill," cried the young woman, as the tall form of the Pony Rider captain, about whom they were feeling anxious, as he did not overtake them, was seen in the midst of the exhilarated crowd.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON TIME.

Buffalo Bill found his horse patiently awaiting him, and as the animal had had a good rest, he mounted and pushed him hard for the next station.

Then he recalled, by keeping the same horse he could branch off from where he then was, and save considerable distance, reaching Julesburg in really better time than did he keep the Overland trail.

So he continued on, and knowing the country perfectly, left the stations upon his left, and dashed into Julesburg on time, though his horse could not have gone a mile further.

"Thinking of my horse reminds me that I am about used up myself," muttered the Pony Rider, as he neared the post at Julesburg.

He was seen some distance away, and a crowd had gathered to receive him, for it was known that something had happened, as a man with stock had come through and reported the Pony Rider killed at the end of Buffalo Bill's run, and the latter had carried the Express bags on though.

As he dashed up he was greeted with a shout, and Alf Slade was there, watch in hand, and said:

"You did not make the double run, then, Cody?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you have arrived on regular time."

"I aimed to do so, sir."

"Another poor rider is gone?"

"Yes, sir. I took his place."

"Do you mean that you made his ride clear through?"

"Yes, sir, and back, and my own, too."

"You have made a phenomenal run of it, Cody, but must be utterly worn out."

"I will certainly enjoy a rest, sir."

"Have you seen anything of the coach, for Rathburn is behind over an hour now?"

"I have seen him, sir, and he will now get in all right, I think."

"We are especially anxious, as his sister is with him, and there is no telling what these Black Phantoms will do."

"Miss Rathburn is along, Mr. Slade, and all right, while she has proven herself as plucky as her brother, for she has passed through a terrible ordeal, in fact, three of them, for the coach has been held up three times."

"Three times? Then the paymaster's money is gone?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Slade, it is safe."

"Tell me what you know, Cody, for I am sure you have had your share in saving the coach."

"Thanks, sir, for your kind opinion, and I will report my run just as it was."

In his modest way Buffalo Bill then related the story of his run, and the escape of the coach and Rita Rathburn three separate times.

Of his own part he spoke with the manner natural to him, making light of what he did, and seemed much pleased to tell how Hart Rathburn had warded off the second band of Black Phantoms by a bold game of bluff.

Alf Slade listened with deep attention, tersely asking a question here and there, and when Buffalo Bill finished, said:

"Your ride is one hundred and ten miles out, Cody?"

"Yes, sir."

"The same in?"

"Yes."

"And the other run is eighty-five miles each way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Making, with your two hundred and twenty, three hundred and ninety miles."

"About that, sir."

"You did some extra miles in going back to Wild Waters after Scott Kane, and in following the trail of the Phantoms, so I may say you have ridden over four hundred miles without rest, changing horses some twenty odd times, twice saving the coach, its treasure and fair passenger, fighting a duel with the outlaw guard of the horses, and being in two brushes with the Phantoms against big odds, and now you come in on time, and are as modest as a schoolgirl about your grand work!

"William Cody, you are a very remarkable individual, and if you do not make a great name some day, then Alf Slade is no judge of human nature and manly worth."

"You are most flattering, Mr. Slade, and I thank you for your good opinion; but does not that warning note, stretched across the trail, and the behavior of the leader of the second band of Phantoms that held up Hart Rathburn, prove that we have a friend in the outlaw band?"

"It does so appear, Cody; but what about this wounded prisoner you spoke of?"

"Well, sir, he may be dead when the coach arrives, for I do not know exactly how severe his wound is; but he is a mere youth, appeared to appreciate what we did for him, and I wish to get what information I can from him, and so will treat him well."

"I will now see Doctor Stevens and have him prepare to receive the wounded man if alive, and tell Boss Betsy to get the cabin all open for Miss Rathburn."

"You better go to bed."

"After the coach comes in, sir, I'll have to," was the smiling reply.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN AN UGLY MOOD.

It soon became noised about the camps that the coach was all right, would soon be in, and that Rita Rathburn had really come out to see her brother, that it was no false alarm as many had feared.

Boss Betsy was soon to go to the cabin prepared for the fair visitor, throw open the door and windows, and put the last finishing touches on, while she built a fire and prepared to cook dinner.

But Betsy did not wear a happy expression.

She seemed to look upon Rita Rathburn as a rival, as one who would break her record as the only woman in camp.

It appeared to her jealous eyes that the new-comer was to usurp her place, and her face showed it.

Buffalo Bill saw by her expression how she felt, and said, quietly:

"Betsy, you don't look handsome when you are in an ugly mood, and as you do not seem to care to assist Miss Rathburn, I guess you better return to your own cabin, and she can take care of herself, for she is fully capable of it."

"I will speak to Mr. Slade about it now, and tell him you do not care for the position, so he can send to Rocky Ridge and get a woman who will gladly come for the good pay the place is worth to her."

These words fell like a shock upon Boss Betsy.

Once before the Pony Rider had had cause to bring her to her senses by some such threat, and not to care for Miss Rathburn was a blow to the woman.

Betsy was a miser of the very worst type and she sought to make a dollar in every way she could.

"Twenty dollars a month, as promised her, with her own meals, in addition to what she got for washing, making cakes, mending clothes and in other ways, when she could rake in a few dimes, made Betsy appear to be making a big fortune.

So she at once smoothed the ugly look off her face, whatever feeling of ugliness she felt in her heart, and replied:

"Now, Mr. Buffalo Bill, you are too hard on me, for I'm delighted with the place, and will be a sister to the young lady, only I feel bad, thinking I won't be able to please her."

"Oh, yes, you'll please her all right if you don't get ugly."

"Now look cheerful, for I see you have rigged up in ribbons and a new gown, and though Miss Rathburn may not wish to adopt you as a sister, she will at least need your aid, and we boys are determined she shall not come out here and do her own work if we have to bring half a dozen women to the camp."

Betsy was positively frightened at the suggestions Buffalo Bill threw out of increasing the feminine population of the town, and when the Pony Rider walked away to meet the coach, she was looking her level best, which, at her best, was nothing to brag of, for Betsy was by no means a beauty.

When he reached the halting and starting place of the coaches and Pony Riders, Buffalo Bill found there a very large crowd.

All the camp was there, and the eyes of the men were turned down the trail eagerly watching for the coach to roll into view.

There was no man in the camp more popular than was Buffalo Bill, and his coming was greeted with a cheer, to which he responded by raising his sombrero.

The men, one and all, admired his splendid physique, handsome face and wonderful nerve and daring.

They acknowledged him a king among men, and he was their favorite, for they were proud of his gallant record.

Alf Slade had already given out that Buffalo Bill had made the ride of a lifetime, and while doing so had twice saved the coach from robbery.

The story had gone from lip to lip, and the men knew that Buffalo Bill had saved their pay for them, for it would have been long before more money could be sent through, and also that he had prevented the Black Phantoms from capturing Rita Rathburn.

As the popular Pony Rider reached the crowd, a shout went up from one of the men:

"There she comes!"

All saw a cloud of dust burst into view, and then the coach appeared, the team of

six horses coming along at a slapping pace.

The crowd burst into a cheer, and every eye was upon the two persons on the box.

"It's Hart Rathburn and his sister," cried one.

Another cheer followed, for it was seen that Hart's companion on the box was a woman.

"Now Boss Betsy goes ter pasture, for ther queen o' ther Overland hes come," cried an enthusiastic fellow, and a general laugh followed his words, at Boss Betsy's expense.

Nearer and nearer drew the coach, and as it came within hail there cried a voice:

"Three cheers for Hart Rathburn and his sister!"

They were given with a will, and the driver was seen to raise his hat, while Rita waved her handkerchief.

"We'll give her a greetin', and then string up ther wounded Phantom."

"Even if he's dead, we'll hang him!"

"Yes, he hangs!"

These words were greeted with yells, showing a very ugly spirit toward the wounded outlaw, for Alf Slade had reported that there was one along, if he had not died on the way.

Buffalo Bill ran his eyes quickly over the crowd, as though to see how the majority stood, but said nothing, and stepped forward to greet the coach as it came to a halt.

But he knew that the crowd was in a dangerous mood.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE WELCOME.

Hart Rathburn's face wore a proud look as he drew rein at the end of his journey.

He tossed the reins down upon either side, raised his hat to the prolonged shouts of welcome, and seemed to feel that the beautiful face of his sister had made a decided and instant impression.

"Pards, I thank you for this welcome, but I wish to say right here that if it had not been for Buffalo Bill I would never have gotten in."

"It was Buffalo Bill who saved your money and kept my sister from being held by the Black Phantoms for ransom."

"Through Buffalo Bill the Black Phantom band has been cut down several men, and I say right here that he is the Pony Rider king of the Overland."

A wild cheer greeted these words of deserved praise of a pard, and the handsome hero blushed crimson as he heard what had been said of him.

But, having done justice, as he felt he should, to his pard, Hart Rathburn, still on the box, continued:

"Now, pards, one and all, I wish to introduce to you my sister, who has come to dwell in your midst."

The men seemed to go wild now, yells, war-whoops, cat-calls, whistling and hand clapping, with hats thrown in the air, greeted the introduction of Rita Rathburn.

Her face was a study as she stood there on the box by the side of her brother, who evidently felt proud at the welcome she had received.

She looked over the crowd, her color going and coming, her red lips half parted and her eyes glistening with tear-drops.

But she was equal to the occasion, and holding forth her little gloved hand, a dead silence at once followed her act.

Then, in her full, rich voice, she said:

"Pards, I shake hands, figuratively speaking, with one and all of you."

"I thank you from my inmost heart for your kind welcome, and I feel that I have come, not among strangers, as I expected, but among friends."

"You must all come and see me."

These words were received with a renewal of the yells, and holding her hands out, Buffalo Bill grasped them and she sprang lightly to the ground, Hart Rathburn following her.

"Mr. Slade, I wish to present Miss Rathburn," said Buffalo Bill, leading her up to the division agent, who stood slightly apart, his calm face unmoved by the scene.

He grasped her hand and warmly welcomed her in his peculiar way, and said:

"I will relieve your brother of duty and let him see you at once to your cabin."

"I congratulate you upon having run a dangerous gauntlet in safety, and now that you are here you must feel that the camp belongs to you."

She thanked him in her honest way, and as Hart came up Buffalo Bill whispered:

"You go with her and at once, for I see there are some who are thirsting to hang the prisoner."

"Yes, but I'll be on hand if you need me," and he led his sister away, while Buffalo Bill stepped quickly to the stage door, where Doctor Stevens stood, for he had already had a look at the wounded outlaw.

"These men will make trouble, Cody," he whispered.

"They must not, and shall not," was the low, stern reply of the Pony Rider.

Alf Slade had gone on into the office, with the strong box, and Hart Rathburn had walked away with his sister, so Buffalo Bill was left alone to protect the prisoner.

There he lay, upon the rear seat of the coach, his face white, but defiant, and it was certain that he realized that his life was demanded by many of those in the crowd.

As Buffalo Bill stepped closer to the coach Doctor Stevens saw that he carried two revolvers in his belt.

He evidently had anticipated trouble.

The doctor was a decided man, brave and quiet, and it was his wish to protect the prisoner if Buffalo Bill wished it so, but he saw that three-fourths of the crowd were of another opinion, that they were determined to hang the outlaw, and so he considered him as already doomed, and whispered:

"I fear the crowd will make trouble, Cody, and as the fellow deserves his fate, it is not worth a struggle to protect him."

"I beg to differ, doctor, for I have a good motive in wishing him to live, and they shall not hang him," was the calm response.

The doctor shook his head, and just then the crowd came surging about the coach, one of the men, a stock tender, calling out:

"Now, pards, we'll hang ther Phantom. As we've welcomed ther leddy like a leddy, we'll welcome this passenger like a pirate. Who has got a rope?"

"Here's my lariat," shouted a voice, and as the crowd moved nearer, Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hold, men! I have something to say just here."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SHOWING A BOLD FRONT.

The crowd paused at the words of Buffalo Bill.

It gave him a chance to look over the faces confronting him, and recognize that he had the worst element in the camp to deal with.

Most of the men were the friends and backers of Badman Bender, and he thought he could see the hand of that individual in this feeling against the prisoner, though the ex-Ban of the Overland, as he had delighted in being called, was still confined to his cabin.

Still, Buffalo Bill knew that Bender was making his wound appear worse than it really was, and he could have been about if he had cared to appear.

But his backers were there in force, and this demonstration was not only against the wounded outlaw, but Buffalo Bill, whose desire to keep the prisoner had become known.

As the crowd paused when the Pony Rider spoke, the ringleader, in answer to his words, asked rudely:

"What has you got to do with it, Buffalo Bill."

"He is my prisoner, and I have a motive I cannot explain, but a good one for all concerned, in wishing him to live."

"Wal, we has a better reason for wishing him to hang."

"What is it?"

"He's one of ther Black Phantom gang."

"As he was captured with a mask on, and trying to rob the coach, no one knows that better than I do."

"Then he hangs."

"Not now, at least."

"Does yer protect a outlaw?"

"I do, in this case, for he is a wounded man and it would be most cowardly to torture him, to hang a man who cannot stand up. But outside of this, I wish him to live for a purpose."

"Well, he don't live."

"I say that you shall not hang him."

"Pards, a man who perfects a outlaw must be of the same stripe," and the ringleader turned to his followers.

"There was a chorus of "Thats so!"

Buffalo Bill smiled, and rejoined:

"Well, I'll match my record against any coward who accuses me, and in looking you over I see that none of you are men who take the risks of riding the Pony trail, driving stage or herding stock off from the camps, so you have little to say in this matter."

There was considerable laughter at this hit at the trouble seekers, but it simply inflamed them to push their claim still harder, and the ringleader said:

"Well, we knows our business now, and intends ter do as we thinks best, so just keep quiet, Buffalo Bill, for we don't want ter do yer no harm."

"But I'll harm the first man who lays his hand upon my prisoner, so be warned."

"Do you mean that as a threat?"

"I don't see how you can take it any other way."

"Do you mean that you'll shoot?"

"I'll protect the prisoner."

"If you has ter kill?"

"If I have to kill, yes."

The response was calmly uttered, but those who knew Buffalo Bill were convinced that it was no idle threat.

A silence followed for a full quarter of a minute, and it seemed much longer.

Then the ringleader of the mob said:

"Well, Buffalo Bill, you has declared ye'rself against ye'r friends and for an outlaw, and all I has ter say, speaking for all of us—"

"No! no! speak for yourself!" shouted a score of voices.

"I speaks for myself and honest men who feels that a outlaw should hang, and hang he does."

A cheer greeted these words, but there were many who did not join in it.

The ringleader of the mob had the majority with him beyond a doubt in the wish to hang the Black Phantom prisoner, but there were a number who had no wish to antagonize Buffalo Bill, or who believed he had good reason for wishing to save the prisoner.

But, in looking over the crowd, it seemed that Buffalo Bill had few friends to uphold him in his determination to protect the young road-agent.

The wounded man half sat, half reclined upon the rear seat of the coach, and Doc Stevens could not but admire his cool defiance in spite of his threatened awful fate.

He uttered no word, and kept his eyes fixed upon Buffalo Bill, though he was keenly sensitive to all that occurred and to every word uttered.

As he saw that the crowd was determined to hang him, he suddenly spoke:

"Mr. Cody, my life is not worth the risk of yours, and I do not fear death."

"Let them hang me, for I deserve my fate, and will not ask mercy when I have brought this upon myself."

The words of the young outlaw, his handsome, fearless face, and his youth, at once gained him admirers among the crowd, and admiration is akin to friendship.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TAKING SIDES.

"Men, you hear what this outlaw says, and yet you would strike a man when he is down, would hang a wounded fellow-creature, even though he be guilty of crimes which he does not deny."

"I tell you again to spare him, and to trust that my motive is a good one in wishing him to live. I appeal to your manhood and ask you to trust him to me."

This appeal from Buffalo Bill was received by some most favorably, but there was an undercurrent running strong through the crowd bent on mischief, determined to oppose the will of the Pony Rider, and the ringleader of this element burst out with:

"It don't go, Buffalo Bill, and fine words has no show here."

"The Phantom hangs, and we has already spent too much time in talk!"

"Then act!"

The words rang out, and Buffalo Bill stood defiantly at bay, a revolver in each hand.

There was a momentary hesitancy or inaction in the crowd, but it would have been only momentary, for the men who led the mob really wanted the life of Buffalo Bill more than they did that of the outlaw.

They had been well coached in their work by Bender, and were numerous enough to carry out what they knew to be his wishes.

That momentary hesitancy, however, was enough for the friends of the Pony Rider to reveal themselves.

Two score hands fell upon revolver butts, and one shot then would have been followed by half a hundred.

But Buffalo Bill did not flinch.

He stood calm and determined.

His course had been decided upon, and there was no backdown in the man.

Buffalo Bill felt that there was a declared war against him.

He thought he could see the plot to get rid of him, and a look over the crowd revealed to him just who his friends and foes were.

Another second, and the lull would be broken by a storm of shots.

The ringleader was getting ready for action.

He would turn his revolver upon Buffalo Bill.

"Hold! what means this?"

All started at the calm voice that broke the spell.

All knew those cold, even tones.

It was Alf Slade.

"I asked what this means?" he repeated, as no one answered his first question.

"It means thar's a Black Phantom here ter hang, and we is going to do it if Buffalo Bill does put himself up ter defend outlaws."

It was the ringleader who replied.

"Did you capture the prisoner, Herder Hollis?"

"No, but he's a outlaw, and should hang."

"That depends upon whether his captor deems it best to do so or not."

"Well, we thinks it's best, and he hangs, Chief Slade, so don't you meddle, for this hain't your chip in."

"I think it is, and I'll have my say," was the unmoved reply.

"We all respects you and wants ter be friendly, but we has decided ter string up the Phantom, and you bet Buffalo Bill, and you, too, Alf Slade, can't save him."

These were bold words, and Herder Hollis won more admirers by his pluck.

Just then it seemed that a clash must come, for all knew Slade, and that he was a dangerous man to deal with.

Suddenly a tall form glided to the side of Alf Slade, who had approached the coach, and stood by Buffalo Bill.

It was Hart Rathburn and he said, in his quick, decisive way:

"Chief, I heard enough to know the trouble, and I've just got this to say, that the men who lead other fools to buck against you and Buffalo Bill are going to be the first to die."

A cheer followed these words, and more men took sides for and against order.

Herder Hollis looked uneasy.

He seemed to feel that the storm was growing beyond bounds.

A glance over his forces showed that he was perhaps in the majority to those who had thus far declared with Buffalo Bill against him.

There were others grouped about, but how they would take sides was unknown to all.

They had not yet shown their hands,

though they were armed, and some of them clutched their weapons.

It was this unknown quantity that held Herder Hollis in check.

They outnumbered the avowed factions greatly.

But Herder Hollis had gone too far to retreat.

He must not waver now, and so he boldly said:

"Your siding with Buffalo Bill cuts no figure, Hart Rathburn, for the Phantom has got ter hang, and them as stands in our way goes under!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

UNEXPECTED INTERVENTION.

There was another lull, when Herder Hollis uttered the words that he did.

No one seemed to wish to fire the first shot.

Every man knew what one shot would mean, and he shrank from bringing on so awful a result.

But each man there was sure that the storm must break.

All knew that the delay was but the calm before the storm.

Every eye was now upon Alf Slade.

He was the one to act first, they felt.

Thos who knew him best felt sure that Herder Hollis would be his game—would be the first man to fall.

And in that awful moment, when men were growing anxious and uneasy, and each second was being counted as minutes, when all knew that the silence would soon be broken by fierce cries and the deadly rattle of revolvers, a slender form suddenly glided in between the defenders of the Black Phantom and the mob that were being led on to hang him, and in the trouble that must come to put an end to Buffalo Bill.

And the one who thus glided between the foes was Rita Rathburn.

She faced Herder Hollis and his party, and her voice rose clear and firm as she asked:

"Do I understand that this is a conspiracy to defeat law and order and turn your camp into a scene of bloodshed and death?

"Are there men here in the employ of the Overland Company who are rebelling against their chief?"

Not a word was uttered in reply.

Glancing over the faces upon all sides, the brave woman continued:

"I supposed when I came here into your midst I was to dwell among men who were brave and law-abiding, though forced to live a wild life."

"Do I now find that there are those here who would be so cowardly as to hang a wounded man, outlaw though he be, whom their chief wishes to live for reasons that are good?"

"I appeal to you, men, who have turned against your chief, not to let me feel that I made a mistake in coming among you."

"I appeal to your manhood to assert itself, and not to do a cruel and cowardly action, even against a lawless foe, for that is unworthy of you."

"Come, do you wish me to leave in dread of being among you, to fear you as I would the outlaws themselves."

"Speak!"

"No, we don't! We wish you to stay, and I for one crawfishes and just backs down."

It was Herder Hollis who spoke, and his immediate pards cheered him.

Others knew that it was a clever ruse to get out of a bad scrape, for he had come now to recognize what he had considered an "unknown quantity," with leanings toward himself, were as true as steel to Buffalo Bill, for in the lull they had been declaring themselves by going over to the side of law and order.

The coming of Rita Rathburn upon the scene had caused his forces to dwindle down to a mere handful.

He was in a sinking boat, a drowning man, and he grasped at a straw and played a bold game to save himself.

It was a pretense of virtue, a sham, to appear to be impressed, and all knew it.

Had a shot been fired before the coming of Rita Rathburn upon the scene the fol-

lowing of the stock tender would have been larger.

But all were glad now to desert.

"You were a coward to wish to hang that wounded outlaw, and in the fracas to try and kill Buffalo Bill, and you are worse than a cowardly cur now to back down with words of pretended repentance upon your lips, when you see that you are beaten."

The words fell with startling distinctness upon all, for it was Alf Slade who spoke.

The division chief was aroused, and his revolver was in his hand as he faced Herder Hollis.

The latter saw that his ruse had failed, and his face paled at the words of his chief.

But he could not but face the man who threw the gauntlet down before him.

He saw the crowd opening a lane between them, and he knew what that meant.

Had Rita Rathburn sought further to interfere she would have lost her popularity, and she had the good sense to see it, so remained silent, without hearing the quickly-whispered words of her brother:

"Not one word now, Rita!

"It must be!"

As the crowd swept to right and left, forming two walls of humanity on either side of the men, who stood fifty feet apart, Herder Hollis instantly raised his pistol to fire.

Alf Slade's weapon was raised, as was the herder's, and it seemed to many that the two revolvers flashed together.

Buffalo Bill's keen ear and quick sight knew that Alf Slade's weapon was fired half a second before the other.

He saw, too, the iron hand that held it, knew the deadly eye that glanced along the sights, was aware of the nerve that nothing disturbed.

The Pony Rider saw, too, that Herder Hollis was anxious, that he was rattled by his failure, dreaded the result, and his weapon came up to a level in a jerky, uncertain way.

Buffalo Bill gave a sigh of relief at what he saw, for he knew that the bullet of Alf Slade had pierced the heart of the herder, whose death-clutch on the trigger had alone fired his revolver.

It seemed that the herder was not hurt for an instant, for he remained upright for a second or two.

Then he sank in his tracks.

Alf Slade had turned on his heel at the instant he had fired, and walking up to Rita raised his hat and said courteously:

"Pardon, Miss Rathburn, for such a scene in your presence, but it could not be avoided."

"Just what my brother said, sir, and I fear that it was so," she answered, with a coolness that surprised him and won his admiration at her nerve.

CHAPTER XL.

BOSS BETSY PREPARES FOR TROUBLE.

Not wishing to shock the eyes of their fair visitor to their camp, the men quickly removed the body of the slain herder to his cabin.

"Come, Rita, we will go to your cabin, now, and Cody will accompany us.

"I left her, Bill, to go on alone, when I saw that there was trouble, but she came back after me, as you see," said Hart Rathburn.

"And it is fortunate that she did, for but for her intervention many a dead body would lie scattered about here now.

"I thank you most warmly, Miss Rathburn, and permit me to say that you have more than canceled any debt of gratitude you may think you owed me," said Buffalo Bill.

"It is kind of you to say so, Mr. Cody, but you do not intend to leave that wounded man exposed to any danger, I hope."

"No, I shall take him to our cabin, with your permission, Hart."

"Oh, yes, by all means, for he will be safe there, and Rita can guard him when you and I are away."

"Doctor, what is your verdict?" asked Buffalo Bill, as he saw that the doctor had looked at the wounded man.

"Splendid! Just like a play she did it, and saved a dozen lives, while Chief Slade's shot was just like him."

"I meant what about the prisoner's wound, Doc," asked Buffalo Bill, laughing.

"Ah, yes.

"Can't tell until I examine him thoroughly."

"Don't think it's fatal, but must trace the course of the bullet."

"Where will you put him?"

"In my cabin."

"He'll be safe there."

"Will you have him taken over carefully, Doc, for I will go with Miss Rathburn to her quarters."

"Certainly; but introduce me—Stevens is my name, you know, Bill, for you may have forgotten."

"No, Doctor Dan, I know your name, and it's more than I can say for others of my friends out here."

"Miss Rathburn, this is my friend, Doctor Dan Stevens, bookkeeper, cashier and clerk of the Overland, while he is also the physician and surgeon of our camps, and a good one, too."

Rita Rathburn smiled at the introduction, said she was glad to know that Julesburg was so fortunate as to have him there, and asked about the wounded prisoner.

"I will report later, Miss Rathburn, as to that."

"But allow me to welcome you to Julesburg, and congratulate you upon the splendid service you have already done."

"If you can accustom yourself to the sudden deaths here of bullet fever, you will like the place, and the rude, but good-hearted men about you, who will all become your devoted friends."

"I like that man, the doctor," said Rita, as she walked on with her brother and Buffalo Bill toward her quarters.

"He is fine looking, intelligent, a student, I can see, and a good fellow."

"I wonder what brought such a man out here?"

"It is guesswork as to what brought half the men out here, sis," replied her brother.

They had now approached the cabin, and Boss Betsy was seen standing there awaiting their coming.

Her face was flushed with expectation, her look showed that she intended to make the effort of her life to rule the one she was to serve.

She stood with arms akimbo, the very attitude to indicate a fighting humor, and she was watching most eagerly Rita Rathburn as she approached.

Boss Betsy was sorry to see Buffalo Bill along, for it told her that she must go slow in "breaking in" the visitor to understand that she ruled the camp.

She knew that Cody would stand no nonsense.

Still it was sink or swim, and she was ready for the fray.

Buffalo Bill read her like a book the moment he saw her attitude, and he said, in a low tone, to his pard:

"Let me have all to say, Hart, and I'll tame Betsy."

Hart Rathburn also realized that the woman was on the warpath, so to speak, that she dreaded that his sister would take her influence from her, and he saw that, by her looks, she was going to be antagonistic, so he was glad to leave the "taming of the shrew" to Buffalo Bill.

The latter, as they drew nearer, could see that Boss Betsy had worked herself into a fever, that she was willing to sacrifice the financial gain she would get not to lose her power as the "woman boss" of the camps, and so he decided to act promptly, for he was determined that Rita Rathburn should not be imposed upon by the only one of her sex in the camp, and the very one from whom she should expect most sympathy and friendship.

"Side with me in what I say and do," he whispered, to Rita, as they got near the cabin, adding:

"I mean in regard to Betsy, there."

CHAPTER XLI.

TAMING A SHREW.

Rita Rathburn nodded pleasantly to the Pony Rider's request, and smiled as though she perfectly understood the situation.

A glance at Betsy had shown her the woman who regarded her as a rival, and of whom she had been told much by her brother.

She seemed to understand the situation perfectly, and so she smiled and awaited the result of the meeting.

Ignoring her hostile attitude and look perfectly, Buffalo Bill said, as they came up, he a little in advance of the others:

"Well, Betsy, we have arrived at last, but a row over in the camps, which Miss Rathburn most ably quelled when no one else could have done so, detained us, but I wish to introduce you to Miss Rathburn, whose comfort you are to look to."

"Miss Rathburn, this is Boss Betsy, as we call her, she having been the only woman in camp, and the friend of one and all, and you will find her devoted to your interests in all things."

Boss Betsy drew a long breath, the wind had been taken out of her sail completely, for she had been the one who intended to do the talking.

It was her intention to "sit upon" the stranger at once, to show her her importance, and to squelch Buffalo Bill and Hart Rathburn by asserting herself immediately.

Before she could recover herself, Rita stepped forward, took her unwilling hand and said, in her pleasant way, but with a certain commanding manner:

"I am glad to meet you, Betsy, for both my brother and Mr. Cody have spoken of you, and your good heart and deeds of kindness are well known to me."

"You are to serve me, I am told, and you will find me a generous mistress, not overhard to please, yet particular, and a good friend, too, to one who proves worthy of it."

Buffalo Bill wished to give vent to a war-whoop, but wisely forebore doing so, while Hart was astounded at the manner in which Boss Betsy had been so calmly deposed from her position as boss.

She could not find words to reply, and seemed to have been silenced ere she could fire a gun.

All she had intended to say to show her importance went from her, she could not even utter a word of welcome, and found herself helplessly defeated without firing any of the hot shot she had prepared for the opening salvo.

She had been a servant before she married, and she sank back into her place as quietly as she could, at last finding words to mutter:

"Yes, miss, I'm sure we'll get along, and I'm glad you've come."

"So am I, for the men have already become my friends, and you must help me to make life in camp more pleasant for them."

"Why, what a sweet frontier home, and how you have fitted it up for me—you are a good housekeeper, Betsy, and I shall at once raise your wages, for you are worth more than brother promised you, but the men don't understand the value of woman's work."

"Now, I'm going to keep Mr. Cody and my brother to dinner, so see how nicely we can entertain them."

"Yes, miss, we can."

"I'll show 'em that I don't intend to let you starve," and Betsy at once set about preparations for making the meal to go around among these hungry persons.

It had become a case at once of mistress and servant, not of equals, as she had intended, in fact, of her being the boss, and she quickly tried to hide the fact that she had set the table for two, herself and Rita, she to be the head.

Hastily she placed another plate, knife and fork, and Boss Betsy tried to make it appear that she had never intended it should be any other way.

"She's a beauty, and as sweet as an angel—why, I'll be a mother to her, Buffalo Bill, and I'm that glad she has come I can't contain myself," she said to the Pony Rider.

"That is right, Betsy, for you'll find it will pay you better, and I don't care to have to get any one from Rocky Ridge, if you will only feel that you have time to do the work for Miss Rathburn, and also look after the boys."

"You'll find her a very lovely lady to serve, I am certain."

And so the frontier dinner was served, as Betsy really knew how to serve it, and the fair hostess and her two guests enjoyed it immensely, Rita remarking:

"Now there is one thing I am determined upon, and that is that you, Mr. Cody, and Hart shall take your meals with me, and I'll not take 'No' for an answer, so Betsy, arrange the hours and quantity of food accordingly, not forgetting that you have two big men and a hungry woman to provide for."

So it was arranged, and the hours were set for meals, the two men to be on hand when their duties did not call them away.

This arrangement seemed to please Betsy also, and she entered upon her duties with no longer any idea that she was the boss, at least in that cabin, but she secretly made up her mind that the rest of the camp should feel her power the more to atone for her surrender.

The shrew had been tamed, the boss dethroned, and the Angel of the Overland had entered upon her new life in the wild Western wilderness.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE PRISONER.

The wounded outlaw youth, who had so nearly been hanged by the mob which thirsted for his life, was carried to the cabin of Buffalo Bill and Hart Rathburn.

When erected, the cabin had been arranged for three, and the Black Phantom was given Scott Kane's bunk, and was told that he would be well cared for, Buffalo Bill arranging with Boss Betsy to serve him his meals and have a certain care over him, for which she would be well paid.

As gold was Betsy's god, she was only too willing to do any extra work that might add to her fortune.

Doctor Stevens had carefully examined the wound and found that it would be dangerous to attempt to extract the bullet. If let alone he decided it would be likely to cause but little trouble, and the man was in no immediate danger.

"I would keep a guard over him, Cody, for he will soon be able to slip away, but be careful of the men you select to watch over him, as there is a determined intention to hang him," the doctor warned.

"I feel that, and for that reason will not let him be put in the regular guard-house."

"I believe I can find this man useful, and he must not escape, so I will pick out three men who can be relied upon to guard him when both Hart and I am away."

"And I will keep my eyes upon him, too, as well as upon the element in camp that is hostile to him, and which but means hostility to you, as you know."

"Yes, and the arch plotter is Badman Bender."

"You are right there."

"How is he getting along, doctor?"

"All right, though he pretends to be worse hurt than he is, but cannot fool me."

"He is plotting some mischief, I feel sure, for he has a few men about him that are friends only to their own interests."

"But I am watching Bender, and these men I spoke of, so I will post you, Bill, if I make any discovery hostile to the good of the camp, and to you."

"I know that, doctor, and please give out that the outlaw prisoner is much worse wounded than he really is."

"I will, and I'll keep him under the influence of drugs to make it appear so, while it will prevent him plotting an escape."

"That is good."

"But, save Mr. Slade. Miss Rathburn and Betsy, I do not wish any one to see him or talk with him, while if you can get from him any information about himself or his band it will be a favor to me."

"I have thought of that."

"But do you know, Bill, that is no ordinary young fellow?"

"So I saw, sir."

"He is refined, has been well reared, and is a man of education, especially well informed for his years, for he cannot be over twenty."

"Not much over twenty was my opinion, sir, and I wondered at such as he being an outlaw at his years," and Buffalo Bill walked on to his cabin to have a talk with the young prisoner.

The new cabin of the pledged pards was a comfortable one, large, and with three rooms, one to sleep in, another as dining-room and kitchen combined, and the third for traps, saddles and other things the Pony Riders wished to keep under cover.

As this room was the best for the prisoner, he had been placed there and made as comfortable as circumstances would allow.

Buffalo Bill found him lying on his bed by the open window in the rear of the cabin, and he was alone, the doctor having just left him.

"Well, pard, how are you feeling now?" asked the Pony Rider, in a pleasant tone.

"Pretty well, sir, and I believe I will be all right in a few weeks, from what the doctor said."

"I hope so, for I wish you to get well, as I have taken a fancy to you, and believe you will not disappoint me."

"I owe it to you, sir, and that beautiful lady, that I was not hanged."

"Well, the men are bitter toward you, as your band have killed a number of our comrades and hit the Overland some hard blows; but it is in your power to atone for past misdeeds and do a good action for the protection of honest men in honest work."

"If you mean, Mr. Cody, by the betrayal of the Black Phantoms, I can do nothing for myself or for you, even after all that you have done for me," was the firm reply of the young outlaw.

"I did mean that I thought you would aid me in a good work, but you are wounded and suffering now, and we will not talk about it."

"You shall be well cared for, and there will be a guard here constantly, not only to watch you, but to protect you, and the doctor will do all he can to bring you back to health."

"When you are all right again I will have a talk with you, and perhaps we can agree upon terms that will be good for both of us."

"Now feel perfectly at home, and try to brace up and get well as soon as you can."

"To be hanged!" was the low and bitter reply of the prisoner.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ALF SLADE'S ROUND-UP.

There were three men selected by Buffalo Bill to guard the prisoner day and night and they were sanctioned in this duty by Alf Slade.

They were to divide their hours so that one would be on from ten to daybreak at night, and the other two divide the other time between them.

One was a Pony Rider who was recovering from a broken leg, another was a stock tender, and the third was an extra stage driver.

Betsy, having been so thoroughly conquered, was more than willing to serve meals to the prisoner, for the extra pay she got, and she had settled down to make the life of Rita Rathburn as pleasant as was possible.

She had found in the beautiful woman one whom she could not rule, and who, ever kind, was still the mistress of her home.

Betsy fretted secretly at her loss of power in the camps, for she was joked about it by the men, but she openly showed no ill feeling and did her work well and with apparent willingness.

Since the affair which had so nearly caused the hanging of the prisoner, there had not been that same feeling of mutual confidence in the camps as before.

The herder had been buried, but only his immediate backers had gone to his

funeral, and those who had been with him in the riot and those who had sided with Buffalo Bill held strained feelings toward each other.

Alf Slade had gone along in the even tenor of his way, but he had not shown any dread of the riotous element, for no less than three of the herder's backers had been sent for, discharged from the company's employ, and ordered to leave camp within twenty-four hours.

Others had been lectured, and told that they would go at the slightest sign of any further conduct that showed they would side with the lawless element.

Then Alf Slade had gone to the cabin of Badman Bender.

He found the man in bed, but looking well, and the doctor had told him he was fairly well, had a splendid appetite, and in his opinion was "playing 'possum."

"See here, Bender, I wish to know just how you are feeling?" said Alf Slade, as he entered the cabin.

"I'm suffering from my wound, as you ought to know, Slade."

"I know that you are not half as bad off as you make out, I know that you are lying here hatching mischief, and I tell you now that you are to leave this camp with the next run of Hart Rathburn's coach, or with Dave Johnson's coach."

"I hain't well enough to go."

"I know better."

"I hain't had no word from the company discharging me."

"I represent the company here and I have discharged you."

"You must go."

"'Spose I refuse?"

"I shall then take the law in my own hands and you will go to the graveyard up the valley instead."

"Doc Stevens is ready to pay you off, and go you must, or take the consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"If you are not ready to go in Rathburn's coach, or Johnson's—for I don't care which way you go, I'll come gunning for you, and it will be your life or mine."

"I'll go, seein' as I hain't able ter perfect myself, and you is sich a coward as ter jump onto a wounded man."

Alf Slade smiled as he left the cabin. He walked over to headquarters and ordered two men on duty as guards over Bender's cabin, allowing no one to go there save the doctor and attendant.

Then he mounted his horse for the rounds of the camps, visiting the quarters of the Pony Riders, the stage drivers, stablemen, herders, and all others connected with the camps.

Those who saw him discerned that he was in dead earnest about something he had in his mind, one of the stock tenders remarking:

"There's blood in the old man's eye. The moon is red, and there's something going to drop."

It was evident from Slade's actions that he was looking for trouble or was going to keep a tighter rein than was his wont, and he was a fine disciplinarian upon the men under him, for none knew better than he what a reckless element he had to master when they once broke beyond bounds.

His tour of inspection over, the men brought to book for any infringement of rules, all laxity of duty reprimanded, and a warning given to some, Alf Slade returned to his quarters to find Buffalo Bill there awaiting him.

"Well, Cody, I am glad you are here, for I wish to tell you that you were right in your warning as there was trouble brewing, as it did not take me long to discover," said Alf Slade, as he took a seat, as though for a talk with the captain of the Pony Riders.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A CLOUD IN THE SKY.

"Then you found signs of trouble, as I suspected, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill, as Alf Slade sat down near him.

"Yes, and you did right to warn me upon your suspicions as you did."

"I wish that more of my men were like you, and Rathburn, too."

"It is a hard, thankless position I hold here, Cody. My life is in deadly danger day and night; I am forced to take human life constantly—to kill, when, within the bounds of civilization, the law would protect. I am dwelling over a powder magazine, as it were, in constant fear of an explosion."

"But it is my destiny, and I am one to uncomplainingly follow Fate."

"Now, let me tell you that I went to Bender and told him he had to go out upon one of the coaches, or there would be trouble."

"He has been the one that is hatching mischief, sir, for I am sure of it."

"I know it now, and I placed two guards over him, with orders to allow only the doctor and the man who waits upon him to go to his cabin."

"That is good, sir; but will it not be well to change the man who cares for him to one of your own men?"

"Right you are. I never thought of that."

"His man can still carry word from him to others and back again."

"I should have thought of that, and I'll see that another man is placed on duty there."

"Now I am sure there is an ugly feeling among the men in all the camps, and it is being fanned into a flame for several purposes."

"I am sure of it sir."

"The first motive is to get rid of me and to put Bender in as division chief."

"Yes, sir."

"There is another motive—to hang the Black Phantom prisoner for effect with the Overland Company."

"True, sir."

"To get rid of you, and, for appearances, to try and put Rathburn in as assistant division agent under Bender."

"Which Rathburn would be the very first one to resist, sir."

"Oh, yes, but then Bender thinks he would bite at the bait, his sister being here, while the company would feel that you and I were bad men, the ringleaders in a conspiracy."

"You got on the right trail this morning, sir."

"Yet there are plenty of true men here yet, and some of them have been approached, but I think I have nipped the trouble in the bud, and as Bender must go, and I have discharged three more, and warned others that their heads are in danger, it may be that now the threatened trouble may pass away."

"I hope so, sir."

"Now you start on your ride to-morrow?"

"Yes sir."

"And Rathburn goes out on his coach the next day?"

"Yes, sir."

"If there is trouble it will be while you are away, and I have just this to say, that I intend to swear you in as assistant agent, secretly, save for the witnesses, and when you return, if harm has befallen me, you are to take full control as division agent."

"Do you understand?"

"I do, sir, but I look for no such trouble after the precautions you have taken, and especially as Bender will be away."

"If he does not return."

"Ah!"

"You will not shrink from the duty I place upon you, in case I should go under?"

"No, sir."

"You will be sworn in, then?"

"I will, sir, under the circumstances, though I do not wish the place."

"But being assistant agent, and finding yourself in full control by my taking off, you will do as your duty demands?"

"I will try."

"I feel that—I know it, Cody."

"Now, about your prisoner?"

"Well, sir, I wish to keep him guarded, both from escape and from being hanged."

"I will see to it."

"I hinted to him that he would be protected, well cared for, and we might come to terms when he got well."

"And what did he say?"

"At once he said if I meant that he was to betray his comrades he would not do so, and so he was being made well to hang, as much as saying that he would die before he would prove false to the Black Phantoms."

"And I believe that he will."

"I fear so, sir, for he is no coward."

"No, indeed, and it is a very remarkable tie that binds those Black Phantoms together."

"It is, sir."

"Not one has yet been found to betray them, and several have died rather than do so."

"I wish from my heart that men could be found thus true in an honest purpose."

"Yes, sir; some can, some cannot."

"It is human nature to be both false and true in a good or bad cause."

"Well, Cody, we will see what we shall see," was Slade's reply, and after a few more minutes spent in conversation Buffalo Bill left for his own cabin, for he wished to have another talk with the prisoner, and then with Rathburn, as both were going away again upon their separate trails.

CHAPTER XLV.

AN UNFORGOTTEN FACE.

There was a larger crowd that was common, except something special was on hand, at the post the next morning to welcome the incoming Pony Rider, and see the outgoing one start on his way.

Just on time the dust rolled into view far away upon the trail, and a shout arose that Dixie was coming.

Dixie was a daring rider, and a good one.

Slender of form, about the average height, reared in the saddle, and a man of nerve, he was popular with all.

Quiet in manner, generous, and with no man for his foe, he was yet known to be one who would brook no nonsense, and men let him severely alone, though he had not so far been tried, for he had laughingly said one day that he "had no graveyard," and did not wish one.

He was from the South, and so was called "Dixie," though he had been put down on the Pony Rider's payroll as Richard Dashwood.

Rita Rathburn had come to the post to see the rider come in and Buffalo Bill start, and she was greeted with a cheer which she pleasantly responded to with a smile and wave of her hand.

She stood with her brother near Alf Slade, and when the shout arose that the Pony Rider was coming, she turned her eyes with interest upon the swiftly-coming cloud of dust, in which appeared the form of a horse and rider.

Next she looked toward Buffalo Bill.

He stood at his post, calm, confident and ready for duty, a strangely picturesque figure, thought Rita, as her eyes rested upon him, no shadow, no sign upon his dark, handsome face that he was going upon a ride that might lead to his death.

On, on, came Dixie, riding like the wind, and the men were ready to give him a welcoming cheer.

As he rode a double ride, so to speak, a fifty-mile run, going out again soon after his arrival, he did not pass much time in Julesburg, so that his headquarters were at the other end of his ride and there were few that knew him well.

He and Buffalo Bill had been good friends, yet they saw little of each other.

As he drew nearer, from what she had heard of the man, Rita Rathburn drew nearer the post to get a good look at him.

A moment more, in the midst of a wild shout, he dashed up to the post, threw himself from his saddle, politely saluted Alf Slade, and handed him the well-filled saddle pouches.

Alf Slade glanced over the contents, took out an official looking document addressed to him, and handed the pouches to Buffalo Bill.

Slinging them across his saddle, Buffalo Bill was about to mount his rearing, restive horse, when Dixie sprang to his side, as though to aid him, and Rita distinctly heard the quickly-uttered words, low though they were:

"There's a letter in the pouches for you, Bill."

Buffalo Bill nodded, leaped into his saddle, and his horse was away like an arrow from a bow.

Rita Rathburn saw that Dixie was a very handsome fellow, dust covered as he was from head to foot.

He wore his hair long, he had a silken mustache, a dark, expressive face, and his eyes fairly startled her as she caught them turned full upon her.

His form was elegant, and he was dressed with an eye to color and uniform, for he wore white corduroy pants stuck in top boots, a blue jacket negligee silk shirt and soft hat of gray.

She noticed that his hands and feet were small and shapely and his boots were of the finest make and his spurs were costly ones.

But she started at his gaze and returned his courteous salute, while she heard his low words to Alf Slade:

"Chief, who is that beautiful girl, and why is she here?"

The chief's reply she did not hear, as he walked off with the Pony Rider, but as she turned to accompany her brother back to her cabin, she said:

"Hart, who is Dixie?"

"A Pony Rider, sis."

"I know; but what is his name?"

"Dixie."

"I mean his real name?"

"It is Richard Dashwood."

"How long has he been on the Overland?"

"Six months on the Julesburg run, I believe, but he has ridden other runs to the east and west."

"Hart, I have met him before."

"Nonsense!"

"I have, and his face will come back to me in time, and I will recall when and where I have met him."

"You doubtless mistake him for some one else."

"No, I am not mistaken."

"It is a face not easily forgotten."

"When I have seen it without the mask of dust he now wears I may recall it perfectly."

"When does he start out?"

"Within an hour."

"I wish to be at the post when he leaves."

"All right. We will go as you wish, if only to convince you that you are wrong."

"I am not wrong."

CHAPTER XLVI.

DIXIE, THE PONY RIDER.

That her brother was anxious about something Rita Rathburn could readily see, and as they reached the cabin she asked:

"Now, Hart, tell me what troubles you, for am I not here to share all your worry and danger?"

"Yes, Rita, and your level head can help me, as I'll tell you frankly that I do not like the way things are working just now."

"What is wrong?"

"Well, Alf Slade was placed over this division as the very man to handle the rough characters that haunt a frontier camp. He has done his work well, and though seemingly a hard master and cruel, he does not dare relax an inch, for it would be his death knell."

"This man, Bender, the one who proudly calls himself the Boss of the Overland, was assistant division agent, and he is working mischief, and about half of the men are on his side, from one motive or another."

"Of course this same element is against Cody and myself, and it is, I believe, their intention to kill Slade and take the affairs of the Overland in their own hands."

"I go to-morrow on my drive, and then Slade has no one as near to him as Buffalo Bill and myself, whom he can call upon to help him, while you remain here without our protection also, should they make a break during our absence."

"Now, Hart, don't you fear for me, for I can take care of myself."

"As for the man Bender, Buffalo Bill

told you he was to be sent out on your coach."

"If he goes."

"I believe Alf Slade, from the little I have seen of him, will be equal to the occasion, should he refuse, and you will be here then, while I will do what I can also, though it may not be very much."

"You are a brave woman, Rita, and if Bender goes with me I will feel that the danger is passed."

"He must go with you, and that is all there is about it, for the Overland Company must not be run by a set of lawless, irresponsible men."

"Well said, Miss Rathburn, and I thank you."

"Unintentionally I was an eavesdropper, and overheard enough to know that your brother has been telling you the exact situation here," and Alf Slade stood in the cabin door.

Then, as he entered, he continued, in a low tone:

"I saw Betsy intent upon listening to what you were saying, so I came to your cabin, and thus let her see me, and it drove her off from her eavesdropping."

"I sent her off on an errand to my cabin, and so overheard a part of what you were saying."

"I do not trust the woman, so be watchful of her without allowing her to know you suspect her."

"I came, Rathburn, to have you go to the post with me when Dixie starts."

"I will go with pleasure, sir, for that was my intention, and my sister was going with me, for she thinks she has seen Dixie before."

"She must have done so, for he made the same remark, asking me who Miss Rathburn was, and saying that he had somewhere met her, though he could not recall when or at what place."

"Then you were right, sis."

"Shall we go now, sir?"

"Yes."

The three left the cabin together, and met Betsy returning from her errand.

"I got them, sir, and you shall have 'em on Saturday," she said, alluding to a bundle of clothes she carried.

"All right, Betsy."

"But let me tell you that Miss Rathburn says you are taking the best care of her."

"I guess I know how," was the assertive response.

On to the post the others then went, and as they drew near, Dixie, the Pony Rider, came out of the headquarters with Doctor Stevens and met them.

"Dixie, I wish you to meet my sister," said Hart Rathburn, stepping forward and greeting the Pony Rider, who had brushed the dust of travel off and looked the handsome fellow he was.

"My God, Rathburn, why did you bring her out here?" asked Dixie, in an earnest way.

"She came for a purpose of her own, and which I wish to tell you when next you come in, for you can help her, perhaps."

"Command me, Rathburn; but I shall be glad, indeed, to meet your sister, whom I thought I had seen before, but suppose I am mistaken."

"She said that she had met you; compare notes and find out."

Leading the Pony Rider up to where Rita stood with Slade, Hart presented him to her.

She extended her hand, and asked, as she looked him fixedly in the eyes:

"Where have we met before, Mr. Dashwood?"

"I have never enjoyed the pleasure of an introduction to Miss Rathburn before, I am certain," was the answer.

"I must be mistaken, then," said Rita, in a thoughtful way.

The time was up now for the Pony Rider to start, and with his Express pouches across his arm he raised his hat politely to Rita, saluted Alf Slade, and, with a dexterous spring was in the saddle and away.

"Brother, Mr. Dashwood is mistaken, for I have met him before," said Rita, as the Pony Rider disappeared up the trail,

and the brother and sister were returning home.

"When and where, sis?"

"I do not know, I cannot recall, but I know that we have met before, and I am sure of one thing."

"What is that?"

"That he knows it, too," was the answer.

And this answer puzzled Hart Rathburn, for he also had possessed the same idea.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AN IRON NERVE.

Again did the crowd gather about the starting post at Julesburg, for it had come the time for the coach to come in, and Hart Rathburn to start out.

Alf Slade went to the cabin of Bender half an hour before starting time, and said:

"You are ready, I suppose?"

"No; I'm not able to go."

"See here, Bender, you shall not play any trick game on me."

"You are well able to go, and you start in Rathburn's coach."

"I guess the men will not see a wounded man made to do what he is not able to do."

"You are a nice one to talk that way, when you were going to have your gang hang a wounded man two days ago."

"He was an outlaw."

"Ah! I thought you were at the bottom of Herder Dick's actions, and you have acknowledged it."

"Outlaw he was, yes, but a human being, and open in his lawlessness, while you are underhanded in your acts and pretend honesty."

"Here, men, get this man ready to go on that coach, and if he resists put these irons upon him," and Alf Slade drew from his pocket some manacles and tossed them to one of the two men who were acting as guards.

Bender was white with rage, and shouted out:

"You have kept me a prisoner here, would not allow my friends to see me, and now are sending me, a wounded man, unable to travel, out of camp, and in irons."

"The men will not stand this."

"One word, Bender."

"You were appointed by me to your place and you abused your power and my confidence."

"You have plotted to get rid of me, to step into my position and authority; you have refused, when discharged by the company's superintendent, to go."

"You are determined to remain here and foment trouble, and I am equally as determined you shall go."

"I have killed men before, when I deemed it necessary to do so, for the good of the company, and the country, and to preserve the peace of this camp, so if you make any call upon the men to protect you, if you attempt any resistance, I shall send a bullet that instant into your brain."

"You need not put the irons on him, men, need not guard him, for he walks with me to the coach, goes from here quietly, or, by Heaven, I will kill him!"

"Now, Bender, come with me!"

The calmly-uttered words of Alf Slade had their effect.

They cowed the bully and frontier terror.

He knew that Alf Slade would put a revolver to his head and shoot him as he would a dog.

He dared not disobey, dared not resist, dared not utter a word to cause trouble.

He knew when he was whipped, and he got up and began to dress, though he groaned the while, as though with pain.

Alf Slade stood by him, and when he was ready, while the two men acting as guards carried the man's traps, he walked by his side to the starting post.

The coach was there, and Rita Rathburn stood near, talking to Doctor Stevens, who said, eagerly:

"See, Slade has mastered his man."

"I hardly believed it could be done."

Hart Rathburn stood, gloves and whip in hand, ready to mount his box, and it seemed as if every man in the camps was

gathered there, and some of the crowd had a very menacing look.

There was Roper Dick, who looked taken aback when he saw his pard Bender coming to the coach with Alf Slade by his side.

To his astonishment he saw that Alf Slade was talking pleasantly to Badman Bender, and he muttered to several who stood near him:

"It's a clean backdown, pard—the second time Badman Bender has took water. What's ter be done?"

"Nothin', until Bender speaks, for he's doubtless playin' a game o' some kind," replied one near Roper Dick.

"All right; we waits ter see bluff," asserted the Roper.

On came Slade and his man, and reaching the coach, the agent politely threw open the door, and said:

"Get in, Bender."

The man obeyed sullenly.

But he was cowed, as some saw, though others did not.

He knew that his life hung by a thread.

A word, a look even, might be the signal for his death.

"Remember me to the superintendent, Bender, and write to let us know how you get along in your new place," said Slade, in an even tone.

Then he added:

"All ready, Rathburn."

"Boys, give pard Bender a good-by cheer!"

The cheer was given with a roar, and the coach rolled away.

Alf Slade's nerve had saved many lives.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE WARNING LETTER.

When Buffalo Bill heard the low, muffled words of Dixie to him, that there was a letter in the Express pouches for him, he knew that it meant more than that some one had written him and the letter had gone wrong.

After he had gotten well out of sight of the camps, Buffalo Bill determined to see what the words of Dixie the Pony Rider meant.

So he drew up among the rocks where no watchful eye could see him, and, opening the pouches, found a letter addressed to him.

There was no postmark upon it, and it was simply a sealed envelope, addressed:

"Important.

"Wm. F. Cody,

"Buffalo Bill,

"Pony Rider,

"Overland Express."

The writing was that of one who had been educated, and breaking open the envelope, Buffalo Bill read:

"Pard Bill—I will sign no name, for you know that the one who spoke to you is the writer, and signatures are dangerous."

"How, it matters not, at least now, but I have reason to know that you are to be held up at Black Canyon on your run, and robbed of the treasure you carry, for there is a valuable freight in your Express this ride."

"You will not be killed, for there is a secret influence that saves you, and will until it can be exerted no longer."

"But you will be robbed, and the robbery is to be laid upon you—that is, you are to be accused of robbing the pouches of this particular treasure, and placing the charge against the Black Phantoms."

"This will come out and you will be driven in disgrace from the Overland trail."

"As I know this country well, I draw a map below of a trail you can follow and thus flank the Black Canyon."

"When I can I will place you on your guard, for if this trap fails to catch you this time it will be sprung again upon you."

"I believe you feel that you can trust me. Do so, for I will have more to say. From

"A PARD."

Buffalo Bill's face paled as he read this warning letter.

When no danger of death could drive

the blood from his face, the fear of a blow at his honor, and which would be fatal, had more terrors for him than bullet or knife.

"God bless Dixie! I do trust him.

"Warned by him, I shall avoid the trap, and I know how to avoid Black Canyon well, though he is not aware of it, and sends me this map.

"It is the very trail I would take; and more—I shall have a look at those fellows who are watching to entrap me.

"Perhaps I can catch them unmasked, and I may know a Phantom or two.

"There is no harm in seeing, anyhow, for I go within a quarter of a mile of the canyon.

"Come, old horse, it is double duty for you, and your very best time, at that."

Placing the letter of warning in his hat, Buffalo Bill sped on his way and when he reached the spot where he was to turn off the Pony trail, surprised his horse by doing so.

As has been said, this trail was not generally known, and had a rugged climb over a ridge, could not be ridden by night, and though cutting off miles, was never followed by the Pony Riders.

In fact, there was no such trail to follow, only a succession of deer paths leading one into another.

But whenever it was possible for him to do so, Buffalo Bill kept his horse at his utmost speed, determined not to lose time by his halt.

At last he came to the spot where he had hitched his horse when he went to the rescue of Hart Rathburn's coach in the Black Canyon, and he dismounted and went rapidly up the ridge.

He felt sure the Phantoms would be at the same place of hiding, or near it, and he could peep over the cliff and get a view of them.

"This is something new for the night raiders, this attacking by day, for heretofore they have always held up the Pony Riders and coaches by night," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he cautiously approached the edge of the cliff.

Suddenly he halted, for the flavor of tobacco smoke came to his nostrils, and glancing along the cliff he saw a mist rising from the canyon.

"There they are, and smoking while they patiently wait, for I am not due there for fifteen minutes," said the Pony Rider, and he crept nearer and nearer and reaching a pine bush, peered over.

What he saw caused a grim smile to cross his face.

CHAPTER XLIX.

RIDING FOR A BIG STAKE.

Seated in the canyon beneath him, Buffalo Bill saw five men.

They were concealed by a large boulder from any one coming along the trail from Julesburg.

As he looked, one of the men arose and taking a watch from his pocket, said:

"It is time to be ready for him, men, for he will be along in ten minutes.

"Out with your pipes, and put your masks on.

"Get your lariats ready to stretch across the trail when he has passed, and you, Bowles, go and tell the other party we are ready and they must be."

"Yes, sir," and the man addressed as Bowles arose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and walked off up the canyon, carrying his mask in his hand.

He was dressed in black, as the others were, and the men were all unmasked, their masks being fastened up over their hats.

Buffalo Bill knew that they were Black Phantoms at a glance, and his eyes were riveted for a minute upon each of them. He had heard every word the leader uttered, and understood well that they were waiting for him.

Dixie, his Pony Rider pard, had warned him just in time of his danger.

Some of the men Buffalo Bill knew, and he smiled with a grim satisfaction as he recognized them.

"I will take a look at those whom Bowles has gone to tell to be ready for

my coming," he decided; so he drew back from the cliff and ran lightly along for a few hundred yards until he came to where he supposed he could see the other band in ambush.

He was not mistaken, for he had hit the right spot.

There were five men there, Bowles having just arrived, and delivered his message.

These men were also unmasked, and among them Buffalo Bill discovered several faces he had seen before, and he looked most intently into each countenance, so as to recognize it again.

"Let them wait; I will go on," he said, as he drew back from the cliff.

Hastening back along the ridge he regained his horse and the animal was pushed hard along the way.

Regaining the main trail, Buffalo Bill soon came to the second station out from Julesburg, and was but a few minutes behind time.

The stock tender had his horse ready for him, and once more on he went.

Rocky Ridge was reached on time, but nothing did Buffalo Bill say to the agent there about his seeing and avoiding the Black Phantoms.

"I was anxious about you, Bill, for a letter came through stating that a package of negotiable bonds was to go through as a letter, and their value is great."

"I got through all right, sir," was the commonplace reply.

"Then the bonds are safe. If you pass Wild Waters with them, O. K. I do not think there will be any danger after that.

"It was a great risk to send them through, but a gentleman in California had to get them with all speed to New York, as he had to have some money there, so he took the chances.

The division agents were not even notified, though I got a special letter to see if the package reached me all right. Yes, here it is," and the agent took the large and thick envelope, glanced at the address, made the date and his initials upon it, and put it back.

This had detained Buffalo Bill but a few minutes, as he got his dinner at Rocky Ridge, and he was soon once more flying along at the full speed of his horse, for his run extended to Wild Waters.

He arrived there for supper, and found the Pony Rider to carry on his pouches, while he returned with the bags that rider had brought in.

It was over that rider's run, it will be remembered, that Buffalo Bill had gone on his last ride, and he was glad to see that the new man put on was known to him, and a good one, for he was most anxious to have those bonds get through in safety.

"Well, Scott, old fellow, what news have you?" he asked his Pony Rider pard, who had turned stock tender to please him.

"Not a word yet, Bill, though I hear the Phantoms are mad clean through at the clever way you got the paymaster's money through, and Miss Rathburn, too.

"Matt Wright is just tickled to death, and says you are indeed the King of the Overland."

"He is very kind; but keep your eyes open, Scott, and you bet we'll down them yet—well, Roper Dick, how goes it with you?" and Buffalo Bill greeted the assistant stock tender.

"Bad, Bill, for I'm on the warpath, as I got a letter by your pouch just now that my namesake at Julesburg backed up Badman Bender, and is a bad one all around, and I want to git a couple o' days off to go down and kill him, for this country is too thickly settled with two Roper Dicks in it, when one is a devil. He's got ter emigrate, or turn me out to pasture in the happy hunting grounds."

Buffalo Bill laughed and replied:

"I'd leave him to Alf Slade, Roper Dick, for I am sure he will have to down him yet."

"He's as good as dead, then, if Slade has him under his eye," said Roper Dick, and he held Buffalo Bill's horse, and the Pony Rider was in the saddle the next instant, and off upon his return.

CHAPTER L.

HART RATHBURN IN TROUBLE.

Never in his life before had Bender felt the power of a master's will as he did when Alf Slade so quietly yet firmly made him obey his wish.

He dared not even make a sign to any of his comrades that Slade might mistake, for he knew that his life hung by the most slender of threads.

Then and there Alf Slade had made up his mind to kill the man for the least provocation, and Bender knew it.

So he obeyed the will of Slade, entered the coach, and, weak at the ordeal he had passed through, sank back upon the seat of the coach.

The reins were in hand, and Hart Rathburn drove off, while Bender gained courage only as distance was placed between him and the man who had so cowed him.

At last Bender began to rally, his will was asserted to get back the old feeling that he was still boss.

Alf Slade ruled Julesburg, and had nipped whatever plans he, Bender, had formed to deprive him of his prowess.

But he was sure now to act, and once out of the camp he would act.

He had his weapons, but Hart Rathburn had all the ammunition, and even his knife.

Slade had allowed no temptation to rest in his way.

But Bender had abiding faith in the comrades he had left behind him.

The plans he had formed must be carried out, and his companions would doubtless realize that he had gone quietly away for a purpose, and with no opportunity to instruct them as to his wishes and intentions.

That they would meet him on the trail he did not doubt.

There were trails known to them by which the coach could be headed off, they being on horseback, for they could take the cut-offs the Pony Riders were wont to use when behind time.

So, as the distance grew greater between the coach and Julesburg, Bender's courage increased until at last he called out:

"Ho, Pard Rathburn, I would like to ride on the box with you."

"All right, climb up when I halt."

The halt was made, the "climb-up" made with an ease that caused Hart Rathburn to say, dryly:

"The chief was right, you are not so bad off as you thought you were, Bender."

The man felt that he had made a mistake.

He had forgotten to "play possum."

"I'm feeling better, and guess I did stick to my bed too long," he said.

"I guess so—the ride will help you."

"Any idea of what you intend to do, Bender?"

"Not yet, but I'll look for work, fer I hain't got no fortin' to live on."

"No, but you are pretty well fixed for a poor man, I have heard."

"I've got a few hundreds, and got all I own along, so I hopes the Black Phantoms won't hold us up."

"So do I."

"Do you think they will?"

"There is no telling."

"If they do I says fight."

"I guess I'd better load up my weapons."

"I have orders to give you your ammunition and knife when we reach Rocky Ridge and not before."

"Does yer intend ter obey them orders?"

"I do."

"Don't be a fool, Rathburn."

"I don't intend to, and I would be to put the weapons in your hands to down me with."

"I'm ye'r friend, Rathburn."

"See here, Bender, oil and water won't mix, and I could never be a friend to such as you, for we have nothing in common, and that is an end of it."

"Then you won't give me my ammunition?"

"I will not until we reach Rocky Ridge."

"Suppose the Phantoms hold us up?"

"I'll depend upon myself, as I have done before, besides, from your own accounts, you are in no condition to fight off outlaws."

"Oh, no, Bender, you must not expect me to do different from my orders from Slade, and as to what you have with you, why you must take the chances of robbery that other people do."

"You is carrying a pretty high hand ag'in' me, Rathburn."

"I am doing what I believe my duty, and if I don't trust a man and don't like him, I won't pretend to do so."

"Then you doesn't like me."

"As frankly as you ask it, I will answer, that I do not."

"Well, that's flat-footed, but ther time will come when I hain't at your mercy as I is now."

"When it does you'll find I shall not shirk the meeting, but are those friends of yours yonder, or are they Black Phantoms?" and Rathburn pointed a short distance ahead where three horsemen had just ridden around a bend in the trail.

CHAPTER LI. EQUAL TO THE OCCASION.

Hart Rathburn's keen eye had seen the three horsemen before Bender had, and he looked at the man beside him when he pointed out to him those who had halted in the trail beyond them.

He saw that the face of Bender lighted up with pleasure, instead of showing a dread of the horsemen, a strange thing if he feared the Black Phantoms.

Knowing the trails as he did, Rathburn was aware that the men could have ridden by cross-cuts to the spot to head him off, going thus seven miles from Julesburg, while he had driven a dozen miles.

The fact that they were so near Julesburg was proof positive to him that they were not Black Phantoms.

Still he saw that they were mounted upon black horses, their clothing was of dark hue, their hats also, and they wore sable masks, so they would pass muster very well for Black Phantoms, the terrible night riders of the trail.

That he had his suspicion who they might be there was no doubt of, and suddenly wheeling upon his companion he said, sternly, while he pressed his pistol muzzle against his side with one hand, and held a pair of manacles in the other.

"Hold out your hands, quick, Bender, or you are a dead man."

"Come, I'll kill you if you delay an instant."

There was no doubting the words or the look, and turning white, Bender obeyed without uttering a word.

The manacles were snapped upon his wrists in an instant, the revolver was left on the seat right at hand, and the horses even had not been halted, while the horsemen ahead could not have noticed that anything was wrong on the coach.

The men had ranged across the trail, and each one had a revolver in his hand.

"Bender, I guess I'm going to be robbed!" said Rathburn, calmly.

"You hain't got nothin' ter be robbed of."

"Oh, yes."

"What?"

"You."

"What does yer mean?"

"I mean that those are not Black Phantoms, but your friends, and they have headed me off to get you."

"See, their horses have been hard ridden, and they wish to play me for a fool, that the Black Phantoms robbed me of my passenger; but they can't do it, Bender, unless they take your dead body, for I'll protect my passenger if I have to shoot him to save him from falling into the hands of the outlaws."

Bender felt that he had left one master for another.

He saw that Rathburn was equally as dangerous as Alf Slade had been.

"Say, Rathburn, I don't know them fellers, and you is dead set ag'in' me."

Rathburn made no reply, but drew rein as one of the men raised his hand commanding a halt.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"We wants ye'r freight, and as you has a passenger, we wants him also to hold for ransom."

"Well, you get nothing, for I'm running as light as a feather this trip, and the passenger is a prisoner and couldn't pay ransom in a hundred years, so he goes with me."

"Search the hearse if you wish to, and it is all I wish you to do, so I can report you all as outlaws, for I know each one of you, and don't you forget it."

"You knows us?" asked one of the men in an anxious tone.

"Yes, and you are men from Julesburg, and I don't want you to think I am such a fool as to drive this run without being guarded, for Alf Slade knows his business."

This was a dead center shot, fired at random though it was.

It told, not only upon the three horsemen, who looked anxiously about them, but upon Bender, who began to feel, from Rathburn's bold stand, that Slade had sent a guard to follow the coach.

The three horsemen talked rapidly together for a few minutes and then one said:

"Well, if yer hain't got nothin', we can't git nothin'; but we wants ye'r passenger and we is goin' ter take him and his plunder with us."

"Are you?"

"We is, and right quick, for we hain't no time to lose."

"No, you have very little time to lose, if you don't wish to run your heads into a rope noose!"

"Come, pard Bender, git down quick."

Rathburn laughed aloud, while he cried:

"You know him, then? A dead give away! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You shut up, Rathburn, or you gits hurt!" shouted the leader of the party.

"I may, but others will be in the same boat—hold! I've got my revolver in my left hand and it is cocked, the muzzle pressing hard against Bender's body, so if you attempt to take him I shall pull trigger, and you get him dead—I swear it!"

This bold assertion fairly stunned the men.

They had started to dismount, but sat on their horses like men who were dazed by a blow.

"For God's sake, pards, don't do nothin' to make him shoot, for he'll do it, as I knows," fairly howled Bender in an agony of fear.

CHAPTER LII.

AN ARRIVAL UPON THE SCENE.

Hart Rathburn was certainly master of the situation thus far, though big odds were against him.

He had shown himself equal to the occasion, however trying it had become.

The men were there to rescue Bender, three to one against the driver.

But the man they wished to rescue, to have him go back by night to Julesburg and lead in the overthrow of Alf Slade and order, was threatened with death by the bold courage of Rathburn, the driver.

"See here, men, I've got Bender in irons, so he is no use whatever to aid you. I'll kill him if you attempt to take him, and I'll be ready for one, perhaps two, of you before you can get rid of me, while the guard will come up at the firing, and the chances are that you'll hang for killing me, so I'm ready to start the game whenever you say."

As though to convince his friends of Rathburn's words being true, Bender raised his hands and revealed that they were manacled.

The three horsemen were certainly in a quandary.

What could they do?

Time was precious, and they were most anxious to accomplish their purpose and get away.

But the driver held the key to the situation.

Again they hastily consulted and then the leader asked:

"Is Bender a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"What fer?"

"Inciting a conspiracy against the officer of the Overland Company at Julesburg, and causing death and rioting."

"What does yer intend ter do with him?"

"Take him to Rocky Ridge and send him on through to stand trial."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Bender.

This was a new phase upon his case he had not suspected.

He felt that Slade had the right and the power to arrest and send him to the superintendent for trial.

If he went where civilized courts would sit upon his case it would go hard, indeed, with him.

Then, too, Bender had the most urgent reasons for not wishing to be caught again within the bounds of civilization, to get into the clutches of the law.

He well remembered that he had left the East under a ban, that he was wanted badly for certain crimes he had been guilty of.

He had certainly tried to raise a riot against Alf Slade; had placed himself in the position of a conspirator against the powers that were, had outlawed himself by his acts.

Was it a part of Alf Slade's revenge to make him suffer?

The words of Hart Rathburn would certainly so indicate.

The situation was a critical one for Bender, and for Hart Rathburn as well.

The life of both hung in the balance.

But Rathburn had the nerve to do and dare.

Whether he was acting with Slade's authority or not, he had cast down the gauntlet and would stand by it.

It became a question of whether the three men would yield to the situation, or make a fight of it and put the driver to the test.

Thus matters stood when Bender said:

"Pards, let him drive on, and you hang on out o' sight, for you'll git thar' in the end."

What the outcome of this suggestion would have been no one can tell, for suddenly there came to the ears of all the rapid clatter of hoofs.

The sound was on the trail ahead of where the coach had been halted.

Whoever was coming was concealed around the bend.

With the rocky cliffs on either side, there appeared either many echoes of the hoof-falls or that half a dozen horsemen were coming.

They were coming at a rush, too.

The three horsemen recalled what Rathburn had said about having a guard.

Why might not that guard have followed them on the shorter paths and come out in the stage trail ahead where they had.

They wanted to rescue Bender, but they preferred more to serve themselves, and like one man their spurs sank deep into the sides of their horses, and the animals were away at a run, heading for the timber a few hundred feet distant.

Hardly had they done so than Rathburn laughed and said:

"Brave fellows, those; but then Buffalo Bill is a man whom it does not do to fool with."

"Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, I generally meet him within a mile of this spot—see, there he comes!"

Bender uttered a savage oath as Buffalo Bill shot around the bend, and seeing the coach, began to slacken his speed.

Another moment and he reined up alongside the coach, while Hart Rathburn broke out into a wild war-whoop of delight.

CHAPTER LIII.

RATHBURN GOES THROUGH.

The arrival of Buffalo Bill was like a death-blow to Bender.

He sat there on the box almost trembling with rage and dread and his face was of a livid hue.

Those whom he had expected aid from had deserted him, and were spurring through the timber to seek safety themselves.

They had made a bold stroke to take

Bender from the coach, but could do no more.

So they had fled, and Bender must take his chances.

As the Pony Rider reined up, he asked in his cheery way:

"Anything wrong, Pard Hart?"

"Not now, Bill."

"What was wrong?"

"Mr. Slade persuaded Bender here to go to Rocky Ridge, and got him away without a row; but we were held up here by three horsemen, who wanted to take my passenger for ransom, and I was in trouble until we heard the clatter of your horse as he came along."

"I knew it was you, but they didn't, and they are going now at full speed for some place of safety, so you see you have enabled me to obey the chief's orders."

"I am glad of it, though I deserve no credit for it."

"Bender is in irons, I see."

"I put them on him, as I feared a rescue, and I'll keep him ironed now until I reach Rocky Ridge, for I dare not trust him."

"Are you goin' ter send me on through?" eagerly asked Bender.

"I have no orders to do so, and will relieve you of your manacles when we come in sight of Rocky Ridge."

Bender's whole face changed at this, for he had feared that the result would be different.

Delighted at the fact that he was not to be held a prisoner for trial, he was silent, seemingly content to remain manacled.

"Well, Hart, any report to send back?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"No more than what you know, Bill."

"Any news ahead of me?"

"None to speak of. Keep your eye on Bender after you take his muzzle off, for he's as treacherous as a snake," and Buffalo Bill rode on, while Bender said, savagely:

"He better keep his eye on me, for I'm not done with him."

"A bad threat to make, Bender, and I'll tell him of your good intentions, so he can look you up when he comes to Rocky Ridge."

This silenced Bender, and Hart Rathburn drove on at a brisk gait to make up for lost time.

He soon made up what he was behind, and reached Rocky Ridge on time, halting before he drove in just long enough to take the manacles off the man's wrists and to give him his ammunition, remarking as he did so:

"You see I am not afraid of you, Bender, and it is not my intention to say anything of what has happened on the way, or at Julesburg."

"You are not in the company's service now, so can go your own way, but I warn you now, if you cross my path with any show of hostility, it shall be war to the knife between us."

"I hain't goin' ter buck ag'in' you, Rathburn, fer you has treated me squar'."

"It were your duty ter do as yer did, and I don't blame yer, and I likes yer, so let us be friends."

The man held out his hand, and Hart Rathburn hesitated a moment.

Then he said:

"I'll take your hand, for I seek no man's enmity, and I neither care for your life, or to have you take mine, so we'll bury the hatchet, though friends you and I can never be."

"Here we are."

A moment after the coach rolled into Rocky Ridge, and throwing the reins on the back of his wheel horses, Rathburn sprang from the box and walked into the quarters of the company's agent, who had come forward to greet him.

"Any news, Rathburn?" the agent asked.

"Not much of importance, sir, for I have but one passenger, and no freight of value."

"You have Boss Bender, I see?"

"Yes, sir, and I believe he stops in Rocky Ridge—you know of his trouble with Mr. Slade, I believe?"

"Yes; Slade wrote me."

"Then I would suggest that you watch

him, for my idea is that he will return to Julesburg and cause trouble."

"I would not speak of the man to others here, but he is a bad one clean through, and but for Mr. Slade's nerve he would have caused a row when he left."

"I had trouble with him on the way, as some of his gang, masked as Black Phantoms, headed me off, and but for the coming of Buffalo Bill I do not know how it would have ended."

"I suppose Bill told you of his carrying big money through in safety on his last run?"

"Not a word."

"Cody is not a man to boast of his deeds, or even tell them."

"I know that, but as you suggest, I will spot Bender, and see just what he is up to, for he must not be allowed to catch Slade off his guard."

"That will be hard to do sir."

"I believe you, but still a hidden foe is dangerous."

"Now tell me how your sister likes Wild West life?"

"She is at least contented, sir, and I wish to have a talk with you to see if I can get on the track of one she is anxious to find, to get his signature to some papers of an important nature."

"I will help you all in my power, Rathburn," was the answer of the agent, but he was unable to tell anything about such a man as Burton Bradford.

CHAPTER LIV.

TO GO ON A TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill rode to the post in Julesburg on time, and handed the pouches over to Alf Slade.

It did not take the Pony Rider long to see that there was a cloud upon the camps. There was a crowd at the post, but the faces of the men wore a serious look.

Rita Rathburn was there to welcome the incoming Pony Rider, and she greeted Buffalo Bill pleasantly.

A few cheered, but the men did not give the hearty reception they were wont to extend to the gallant captain of the Pony Riders.

Several asked him, somewhat eagerly, he thought:

"Did you meet the coach?"

"Oh, yes."

"Anything wrong?"

"How wrong?"

The questioners did not answer, and Buffalo Bill went on to Alf Slade's quarters.

"The boys look gloomy to-day, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, and there is trouble ahead, I fear."

"You got through all right?"

"Yes, sir, though I would not have done so but for this letter," and Buffalo Bill handed over the letter he had received from Dixie, the Pony Rider.

Slade, having read it through carefully, said:

"Dixie said nothing of this to me, but he did tell me what I had not known until I had read my letters, that you carried through a large sum of money, and you may know how anxious I was about you."

"The money went through, sir, and if it had not I guess my name would have been ruined, until, at least, I could have captured those who sought to rob me and drive me in disgrace from the Overland. Had that happened, chieff, I would have devoted my life to running them down."

"I shall never forget Dixie, Mr. Slade."

"No, you have good reason to remember him. He is a fine fellow, one to tie to, I feel assured."

"Yes, sir, he is that."

"Did you halt when you met Rathburn?"

"Yes, sir, and I wish to tell you about that," and the Pony Rider told how he had found Hart Rathburn in trouble, and the cause.

"And you drove the Black Phantoms off, Cody?"

"My coming caused them to run, sir, but I never saw one of them."

"It is strange the Black Phantoms should come so near this place."

"They were not Black Phantoms, sir."

"Ah!"

"My idea is, and I am sure that Rathburn thought the same—though he would not say as much before Bender—that the three men were from the camps."

"By Heaven! I believe you are right, Cody!"

"They were made up to resemble Phantoms, sir, and had cut across trails to head the coach off and rescue Bender."

"I wonder if Rathburn will know who they are?"

"You can ascertain that; sir, without waiting, by going the rounds of the camps and finding out who is absent, or who went out just after the coach did, for they may have come in again by this time."

"I will go at once, Cody, and see you later."

Five minutes after Alf Slade was mounted upon his horse and going the rounds of the camps.

It was two hours before he returned, and Buffalo Bill was at his cabin asleep, after his long ride.

But the chief woke him up and beckoned him to follow, for the outlaw prisoner was in the cabin.

"Your prisoner seems better, Cody."

"Yes, sir. He told me that he felt much better, and the guard said that he was quite cheerful."

"You have held no further conversation with him, since your return, about the Phantoms?"

"No, sir; but I will do so to-night."

"I am going to ask you to do a little extra work for me, Cody?"

"Certainly, sir; I am ready."

"I have spotted those three men who held up Rathburn."

"Good! I believed you would."

"I find that three of the men left camp this morning just after the departure of the coach, and when I tell you who they were you will see that they are Bender's particular friends or chums."

"That settles it, sir, I should say."

"Not quite, for they went out to look up stray cattle, they stated. They have not yet returned, and I find there are a number of horses astray for which these men are to look after."

"Well, I can find out if they have gone horse hunting or went on a man hunt."

"That is just it, for you are the best trailer in the Wild West. I wish you would slip out of camp, and I am going to ask you to go on foot."

"I will, sir, for I do not care to be seen riding out of camp."

"Just so, and all will suppose you are asleep. It is, you said, only eight miles, to where the coach was held up, and you can find out whether the three men went to that point or not."

"I think I can, sir, and I'll get back some time in the night and report."

"Now I'll have a short talk with the prisoner, and then start on the trail," said Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LV.

AN OATH THAT BOUND.

"Now, pard, I have come for a talk with you," announced Cody, as he entered with cabin and took a seat by the cot upon which lay the wounded outlaw prisoner.

"Yes, Mr. Cody, and I am very glad to see that you have returned from another of your perilous rides," was the answer.

"Some of your people were lying in wait for me, though."

"Ah, sir! But you escaped them?"

"Yes; gave them the slip. Did you know of their intention to hold me up?"

"No, indeed, sir, for I would never have allowed you to ride into a trap. No, no, Mr. Cody; never that!"

Buffalo Bill felt that the young outlaw spoke sincerely.

"You are improving rapidly," he then intimated.

"Yes, sir; I shall soon be well enough to be hanged," was the reckless reply, but there was a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"You need not hang."

"Ah! How can that be helped?"

"It lies in your power to save yourself."

"In what way, Mr. Cody?"

"What is your name, or do you not wish to tell it?"

"I should be ashamed to reveal a name I have disgraced, but I will admit to you, Mr. Cody, that my name is Wilber Andrews. With the Phantoms I am known as the Kid, on account of being the youngest one of the band."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"How long have you been in the band?"

"Nearly a year."

"What made you become an outlaw?"

The youth made no reply, at first, but after a while responded:

"I'll tell you."

"I had a friend, a man whom I had every confidence in, and I was led by him to do things I should never have allowed myself to think of being guilty of."

"He saved my life, though, and I felt deeply attached to him. Besides, I was most anxious to make money, for my father had lost all his property and in his older years was brought down to poverty."

"I knew it was a bitter blow to him and to my mother, and I gave up college and went to work, leaving home to do so."

"It was then I met the man I speak of. I had secured a place of trust, and one night was returning to my employers with a large sum of money when I was attacked by three men who had dogged my steps to kill and rob me."

"They would have done so but for this man I speak of. He rescued me, killing one of my assailants."

"I was hurt, having received a severe blow in the head, so he took me to his rooms and cared for me until I got well, telling me that he had carried the money on to my employers as I had asked him to do."

"One night he came to me and said the officers of the law were on his track for killing that man—that it was said we had arranged to steal the money and say I was robbed, and the one he had killed was a detective who was watching me."

"There was nothing left for me, as I then saw it, but to escape with him, and I did so, coming West, to learn, when I wished to return, that he had never taken that money to my employers, and they believed I had run off with it."

"In my despair I was led by him to join the outlaw band, and I hoped to get money enough to return what my employers had lost through me, and go back home to begin anew, keeping my dreadful secret."

"I have never taken human life, never individually committed a robbery, though I have aided in holding up coaches and Pony Riders and received my share of the booty."

"Now you know me as I am. Why I made the confession to you, Mr. Cody, I do not know, but I have told you the whole truth."

"I do not doubt it, my young pard; and now I wish to say to you that it is in your power to right the wrongs you have done by making a clean breast of it and aiding me to ferret out the Black Phantoms and run each one to earth."

"My God! But I cannot do that!" was the energetic reply.

"Why not?"

"You never heard of a Black Phantom betraying his comrades?"

"No, I never have."

"It is the oath that binds us together, and I can never break it."

"Remember, your life will be spared; you will have a reward large enough to enable you to pay back that money to your employers, and you can return home with enough to help your parents for a while, and bury your secret of what you have been, forget it all, and begin a new life."

"It is a great temptation, Mr. Cody, and Heaven knows I would gladly accept your terms, if I could—if I dared; but I cannot, and I will take the consequences."

"This is your resolve?"

"It is, sir."

"Irrevocably?"

"Yes, sir; irrevocably."

"I am sorry; but all the same I shall

try to save you, thought I fear it will be hard to do."

With this Buffalo Bill left the cabin, placed the guard again on duty, and started out upon the trail of the three men who had left the camp early that morning upon the pretended search for cattle.

CHAPTER LVI.

WHAT WAS THE SCHEME?

There was no doubt but that Alf Slade was worried at the situation on the Overland.

His division of the trail was a long one. He had control of both coaches and Pony Riders, and hundreds of horses, vehicles and equipments, with other property under his care.

Of course where there are hundreds of men to look after, amid such an element there must needs be many black sheep, and, led by some bold, bad man, who had nothing to lose and much to gain, chaos and lawlessness could be soon made to exist.

The Indians along the line also gave trouble; the outlaws were yet more to be dreaded, and with numerous traitors in camp, the lot of the chief of division was indeed an unhappy one.

But the company heads realized all that was to be contended with and prepared against; hence Alf Slade had been placed over the worst part of the line as the very man to meet and conquer all difficulties.

Thus far he had shown himself capable of confronting and overcoming all that went against him, but the discharge of Bender, the assistant agent, had served to arouse all the evil-doers in the camp against him.

Fortunately for Alf Slade, he had such men as Buffalo Bill, Hart Rathburn, and a few of their kind on whom he could depend in time of need, or trouble.

Cody was, indeed, his main reliance, and now, at the impending peril, the chief more than ever realized his worth. He had just started out to see if the three pretended Black Phantoms who had halted the coach were the three men who had left the camps to look for horses, as they pretended.

The trails of their horses would prove their guilt or innocence, and Buffalo Bill would return at night ready to condemn or to clear them of the charge.

If guilty, Alf Slade intended to act boldly.

He would at once put down lawlessness by a very decided and fearless way of punishment.

"I will call out a guard of Pony Riders and shoot the prisoners at sunrise," he said to himself, as he saw Buffalo Bill leave his cabin and slip away upon the trail.

In the cabin of Rita Rathburn there was also a feeling of anxiety, for she had, with a woman's quick intuition, seen that matters were not going right in the camps.

Most of all she had begun to distrust Boss Betsy—yes, even to feel a certain dread of her.

The woman was more devoted than ever in her service—ven had become most servile, and was always eager, apparently, to do some little act of kindness.

But Rita, having been told by Buffalo Bill and others just what Boss Betsy had been, could not believe it possible the rough woman had so changed in so short a time.

"The Amazon is plotting mischief of some kind, but just what I cannot possibly surmise," said Rita to herself.

She watched Betsy as a cat would a mouse, without appearing to do so.

That evening the young woman had her supper alone, for her brother was away, and Betsy said that Buffalo Bill had told her he would be away until late in the night.

Betsy seemed to have done her best, however, though Rita was to eat alone, and after serving her, had carried the supper of the prisoner over to him, as also something for the guard.

Night came on, and taking her guitar, Rita sat in front of her cabin singing for quite a long while.

Some of the men heard her and gathered near, listening, for her beautiful voice touched their hearts.

"It's like angel music," said one, brushing the tears from his eyes as she finished singing "Home, Sweet Home."

At last she ceased, the men crept away, and silence fell upon the camp.

Betsy, having carefully cleared up the supper dishes, had gone home, and Rita had retreated into her cabin. Not feeling sleepy, however, she had seated herself at the table to do some sewing.

Presently a knock came at the door, and in answer to her question as to who was there, came the answer:

"Jake Ross, miss, the outlaw prisoner's guard, and Buffalo Bill sent me."

Instantly she threw open the door, and there stood the man who served as night guard over the outlaw.

"What is it, Mr. Ross?" she asked.

"The Phantom slipped off this afternoon, miss, while the day guard warn't watching, and Buffalo Bill went on his trail, not wishing any one to know he was gone, as the boys would turn out and hang him if they caught him."

"He took me with him, and we come up with the Phantom, and he showed fight, for he had weapons, and Buffalo Bill had to shoot him, but only wounded him, and the young outlaw is dying, and wants to confess to you, he says, a great secret, so I came after you, miss, for Cody wants to ask if you will do this much."

"Certainly. I will go at once."

"Wrap up well, miss, and I have horses ready outside the camps, so you won't have to walk."

"I will be ready in a few minutes," and the man waited outside while Rita prepared for her night ride.

In a short while she came out, and, following the man, he led her away from the camps into the timber.

A short walk brought her to where two horses were waiting, one having her own saddle and bridle upon it.

"I had to slip them out of the corral, miss, and I put on your own saddle," explained Jake Ross.

Springing lightly into her saddle, Rita followed her guide through the darkness for a mile or more, until, suddenly, a tall form stepped out in the trail before her.

"I have come, Mr. Cody. Is he dead?" she asked.

"I am not Cody," was the reply, and she saw that the man was masked.

CHAPTER LVII.

A TELL-TALE TRAIL.

It was just midnight when Buffalo Bill returned to camp.

A light was visible in Alf Slade's living cabin, and he went there first, before going to the headquarters, where the chief generally could be found the first hours of the night.

A knock at the door brought the answer:

"Come in!"

Buffalo Bill entered, to find Slade seated on the other side of a table which was unique in its way, for it was built of logs and covered with heavy boards.

It was quite high, and underneath was a small arsenal of arms.

Had a foe entered Alf Slade could have dodged down behind his breastwork and opened fire.

Buffalo Bill found him ready to greet a foe, for his hands were resting upon weapons just out of sight.

"Ah, Cody, you are back sooner than I expected! Sit down and tell me what you have found out."

Buffalo Bill took a seat on a rustic chair and answered:

"I find the three men found their stray horses and brought them in."

"Yes."

"They passed me, driving them at a gallop."

"Did they see you?"

"Oh, no, sir; I concealed myself when I heard them coming."

"They were the three men I told you had left camp soon after the coach?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then they did not go after the coach?"

"Yes, sir; they did go after it!"

"Ah, you tracked them, then?"

"I picked up their trail, sir, from where they left the corral. They rode very rapidly, cut across to the deer paths, and came out into the stage trail just a couple of hundred yards ahead of where they halted Rathburn."

"There is no mistake?"

"None, sir."

"You did not lose the trail?"

"I measured the three horses' hoof-tracks at the corral, and never lost sight of them until I got to where they halted the coach."

"When they passed me at a run, driving the stray horses, I looked about until I found two of the tracks I was following, and then I went on as before."

"From the spot of the hold-up I tracked the three horses to the timber, which they fled to, and on from there they went in search of the stray cattle."

"But they halted at a creek to change their rig, and one of them dropped this, which, you see, is a black silk neck scarf cut in two and made into a mask, for here are the holes for the eyes and the two strings at the upper end to tie it around the head."

"I suppose one of the others had the other half of the scarf, and perhaps it was long enough to serve as mask for the three of them."

"A search of their cabin would show whether they have the other masks or not, and you know they room together, and before he was made assistant agent Bender was their camp pard."

"You are right, and you have the proof of their guilt. You have done just what I expected of you, Cody."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Night came on, or I would have followed their trail on after the horses, but, as I was quite a distance from camp I decided to return."

"You did all that was necessary. Now I shall proceed."

"I have decided to await the return of Rathburn, and call all the men to the post to meet the coach."

"When they have left their cabin I shall go there and search for the other masks and what else they wore, and have all in evidence; then I shall have Rathburn make his charge of being held up, and ask him if he can name the men; if not, you will accuse them, and I reveal the proofs; immediately I will order a squad of the riders to execute them, and by that act strike a blow against their lawlessness in camp."

"That done, I shall send a special rider to Rocky Ridge, ordering the agent there to arrest Bender and bring him here, and he shall have the fate of the others."

"What do you think, Bill?"

"You are chief here, sir, and you are standing over a powder magazine, as you know."

"To hold your power here, you can do so only by the severest and seemingly most high-handed acts, but if you waver or show weakness, there are men in this camp ready to ride you down and turn it into a scene of debauchery, terror, and death. Therefore, you are compelled to act—to fight the devil with fire—to use their own weapons against them."

"You look at it as I felt you would."

"Now, you are tired so go to your cabin, and to-morrow I shall act."

Buffalo Bill went to his cabin, but within ten minutes he was back again, and said in a suppressed tone:

"Mr. Slade, the outlaw prisoner has escaped, and the guard that was to watch him is also gone!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

Alf Slade sprang to his feet at the words of Buffalo Bill, and asked in an incredulous tone:

"Do you mean that the prisoner has escaped?"

"He has gone, sir."

"And the guard?"

"Is also gone, sir."

"Who was the guard to-night?"

"Jake Ross, sir."

"I certainly thought he was to be trusted."

"As I did, sir, and, though he had not been very long in the camps, I had an idea that he was a square man."

"But was a traitor, if he has gone with the prisoner."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"Tell me just what you discovered."

"I went to my cabin, lighted a candle, and noticed, as I supposed, the prisoner in his bed."

"But as I did not see Jake Ross, I looked about for him, but could not find him."

"Then I went back to awaken the prisoner, and ask him about Ross, when, to my surprise, I discovered that it was only a dummy in the bed, the man having gone."

"Then I came to tell you, sir."

"I will go with you at once, Cody."

The two walked rapidly over to the Pony Rider's cabin, a few hundred yards distant.

All was as Buffalo Bill had reported it.

"What is your opinion, Cody?"

"Well, sir, I had my talk with the prisoner this afternoon, and found him oath-bound to the outlaw band to that extent. I believed he would die sooner than betray them."

"He seemed to accept his situation in a resigned way, but now I find him gone, and I recall that he told me he had saved some money, and, as we did not search him, save for weapons, he may have had it with him and with it bribed Jake Ross to aid his escape and go with him."

"But he could not go far, wounded as he was."

"He would not have started, sir, unless able to travel, and they will have a good night's start, for I suppose they left soon after Ross went on night watch."

"Doubtless, and it will be impossible to trail them before morning."

"Yes, sir; but you may be sure they went well prepared for a rapid flight, as Ross would take no chances of being recaptured, and he doubtless got horses and food all ready."

"Then we are to regard the prisoner and Ross as beyond recapture?"

"I do not say that, sir, for if they went to the retreat of the Black Phantoms they may be retaken, for that band of outlaws I have vowed to run to earth, and I will if my life is spared."

"It is slow work, sir, but Scott Kane, Rathburn and I are doing what we can, and will be ready to act soon."

"Well, you must be broken down, and you certainly need rest, so we will give no alarm, but at daylight see how they went and if their trail can be followed."

"Mr. Slade."

"Yes, Bill."

"I have a feeling that the prisoner might have been rescued by the Black Phantoms themselves."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir; though, of course, Ross must have aided."

"Well, what then?"

"If they could get the prisoner away in safety, they might try to do more."

"What do you mean?"

"If they captured Miss Rathburn they would do so for ransom, knowing that the men of the Overland would pay big money to get her back."

"Do you really think they would dare so bold a deed in our very camp?"

"They will dare much, sir, and I wish to relieve my mind of the fear that they have captured her."

"You can go to her cabin and find out."

"Yes, sir; and please go with me."

"There is a string in her cabin which we rigged up, leading to ours, and by pulling it hard, she would ring a bell, as a signal she needed us."

"Now, I was away to-night, and she might have rung it and of course got no answer. We will go and see, sir."

Buffalo Bill led the way and the two walked rapidly over to the cabin of Rita Rathburn.

All was dark there.

Entering the little enclosure they had built about the cabin to add to her priv-

acy, they walked up to the cabin, and Buffalo Bill rapped lightly upon the door.

"Asleep," said Alf Slade.

Buffalo Bill made no reply, but rapped again, this time louder than before.

Still no response.

A third time he knocked, but no answering stir within.

He tried the door and it yielded to his touch.

All was dark in the room.

A match was lighted, a candle was upon the table, and when lit it revealed the interior.

A quick search showed that Rita Rathburn was not there, and Buffalo Bill said, sadly:

"I had a fear that it would be so."

CHAPTER LIX.

UNDER SUSPICION.

What was to be done by the two men when the startling discovery was made that the fair dweller in the cabin was gone?

Her bed showed that she had not retired for the night, and her hat and riding jacket were gone.

So, also, were her bridle and saddle, which were kept hanging on pegs outside.

Could she have gone riding at a late hour, lost her way, and was then astray in the forest?

Such a thing might have been possible, but Buffalo Bill, in view of the absence of the prisoner and guard, did not believe it.

She was gone, and he stuck to his first impression that she had been taken by Black Phantoms, who had come to rescue their wounded comrade.

"Wait here, please, Mr. Slade, while I go and see Boss Betsy," said the Pony Rider captain.

"Yes, she will know."

"She will know when she saw Miss Rathburn last, sir."

With this Buffalo Bill walked rapidly away toward the cabin of Betsy Drayton.

It was pleasantly situated in a bend of the creek, and so surrounded by lariats stretched from tree to tree for clothes lines that it was dangerous for any one to approach who was not familiar with the path.

But Buffalo Bill knew the trail, and reached the cabin door in safety.

To his surprise Betsy was still up, for he heard her moving about within.

"Boss Betsy!"

"Who is that?"

"Come to the door, for I have something to tell you."

"Is it all right?" asked the woman, as she threw open the door.

"They have got her!"

"Then—Ah, Buffalo Bill!" and the woman started back in evident confusion and alarm.

"Yes, Betsy, don't be scared."

"I've come to tell you that the Black Phantoms have kidnapped Miss Rathburn!"

"Oh! they have! they have!"

"Yes; are you not sorry?"

"I'm that sorry I'm all broke up with grief."

"Oh, me! Oh, me!"

"You keep late hours, Betsy."

"I was waiting—I mean I was working, darning socks for the boys."

Buffalo Bill, unseen by the woman, cast a searching glance around the room.

He saw no socks or darning yarn about.

He had heard her words when she did not know that he was her visitor, and his suspicions were instantly aroused against her most strongly.

But he was determined not to allow her to think for an instant that he suspected her, and so he said:

"I was with Mr. Slade until late, and when I went to my cabin I found that the prisoner was gone, and the guard, Jake Ross, also, so I went over to Miss Rathburn's cabin and discovered that she was missing, too."

"I at once suspected the Black Phantoms, and came over to tell you, and have you return to the cabin where Alf Slade is waiting."

"I'll go with yer, Bill," she said.

There was no question as to the pris-

oner and Jake Ross being gone, no surprise at what had occurred, not a suggestion made, and Buffalo Bill took mental note of the fact.

This was not like Betsy. The Amazon, as a rule, could ask more questions than any three men could answer, yet now, under this alarming state of affairs, she was silent.

"Did she know all?" was Cody's thought.

She put on her slouch hat and at once accompanied the Pony Rider back to the cabin of Rita Rathburn.

"Watch her as you would a coyote, but don't let her know it," whispered Bill to Alf Slade, and Boss Betsy at once found herself under the scrutiny of two pairs of most penetrating eyes.

They watched her every look and movement, registered her every word, and the more they saw were convinced that she knew something, at least, of this midnight kidnapping of Rita Rathburn and rescue of the wounded Black Phantom.

"You stay here, Betsy, for I am very tired and must get some sleep, and Mr. Slade is going to his cabin."

"At daybreak we will give the alarm, for we can do nothing before, and the men might as well rest until then."

With this Buffalo Bill left the woman in charge and went away with Mr. Slade.

But, in a few minutes, he was back again and on the watch.

He saw her deliberately overhaul all that she could in the cabin, and take a number of things of more or less value and wrap them in a blanket.

This she tied up securely, and, slipping out of the cabin, made her way to her own house.

But she was shadowed there by the Pony Rider.

Returning to the Rathburn cabin, she lay down to rest, and feeling that she was safe until daylight, Buffalo Bill went to his humble home and turned in for the few hours of the night left to him, for he felt that the morrow would be a very trying day, and what it would bring forth he could not foretell.

CHAPTER LX.

THE ALARM.

The dawn was just breaking when Alf Slade went to Buffalo Bill's cabin.

The Pony Rider was up and ready, and the two proceeded at once to the headquarters cabin, and sounded the alarm, to call the men of the camp together.

The "alarm" at the camp was given by having one of the men blow the bugle call to assemble, repeating until the men had gathered.

The bugler was awakened by Chief Slade, and, as the clear notes rang through the camp, being heard a mile away in the still morning air, the men came with a rush toward headquarters.

Each one was armed, while quite a number came mounted for immediate service.

Within a quarter of an hour the whole camp had assembled, all save Boss Betsy.

Then Alf Slade made known the reason of the alarm.

"Men," he said, "while we slept, and under cover of the darkness, a great crime was perpetrated in our midst."

"I had business with Pony Rider Captain Buffalo Bill, last night, and we were together until a late hour."

"When he returned to his cabin he discovered that the outlaw prisoner was gone."

A roar of fury went up from the crowd and a voice shouted:

"I guess Buffalo Bill could tell why he let him go."

The Pony Rider merely fixed his eyes upon the speaker as though to know just who had uttered this unequivocal insinuation against him.

"The prisoner escaped through the aid of his night guard, Jake Ross," continued Alf Slade, and again a roar went up from the crowd.

"He is gone, as is also the prisoner; but not caring to wrong Ross, if innocent, I will say that he, too, may be a prisoner, for it is my belief, and Buffalo Bill's, that

the Black Phantoms visited our camp last night."

A murmur of amazement went up at this, and Alf Slade continued:

"Our belief of a visit from the outlaws was caused by the fact that another person has disappeared from our midst, not a prisoner, not a guard, but none other than Miss Rathburn, the fair guest of our camp."

At these words there was the wildest excitement.

What differences men had among themselves were forgotten; accusations of the few against Buffalo Bill were no longer considered, and the whole camp seemed united upon discovering what had become of Rita Rathburn.

Alf Slade commanded silence at last, and told what discovery had been made, that Boss Betsy had been aroused and taken to Miss Rathburn's cabin, but, as nothing could be done until dawn, no alarm was given.

Then he continued:

"Now it is time to strike back at the outlaws, and I wish the Pony Riders to assemble at once, armed and mounted, and to follow Buffalo Bill's lead in the search of the trail of the night marauders and then the pursuit for the rescue of Miss Rathburn."

"Her brother will be in before very long, and if he desires to lead another party in pursuit, he can readily find brave volunteers among you, while the rest of the men here I wish to keep close in camp and ready at an instant's call."

"In half an hour, Pony Riders, be at your post, here."

Buffalo Bill and Alf Slade walked away then together, leaving the men excitedly discussing the happenings of the night.

"Mr. Slade, there were men in that crowd who knew of last night's visit of the Phantoms, for I was watching every face. The fellow who accused me is one of them."

"I am sure that the three whose trail I shadowed yesterday also knew, for, in all, I spotted about six who showed no surprise—whose faces, in fact, betrayed them."

"Well, Cody, we have a great deal to do, and the coil is tightening, if I mistake not, around a number of throats."

"Now, what will you do?"

"First, find the trail, sir, then follow it to the end."

"You will have but eight men with you."

"Enough to commence pursuit, sir, and Hart Rathburn can follow on our trail with a reserve of as many more."

"I will have him take more than that, for if you track the Phantoms to their lair you must have enough men to strike a telling blow, and if reports are true, they number all of twenty, but are in three separate bands."

"Yes, sir; this a ride for scalps, and it will be as well to let Rathburn bring twenty men with him."

By this time they had arrived at the Rathburn cabin, where Betsy had a good breakfast prepared for them.

CHAPTER LXI.

DIXIE ARRIVES.

After a hasty breakfast, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode to the post.

The Pony Riders were there, eight in number, and ready for the trail.

Alf Slade had told the men to keep close in camp, so as to make no fresh trail, or destroy those that had been made by the marauders.

Going to his cabin, while one rider held the horses of all, the others began the search, headed by Buffalo Bill, for the tracks of the rescuers of the prisoner and the kidnappers of Rita Rathburn.

Several of the Pony Riders were, like Buffalo Bill, experienced trailers, and they went to work with a will under their skilled leader.

The whole camp had turned out, and stood watching them with eager expectancy.

Further and further away went the Pony Riders, examining every foot of the

ground about them, until Buffalo Bill was seen to stoop, then to rise quickly, and his clear voice was distinctly heard:

"I have found the trail!"

"Bring up the horses!"

The Pony Riders all ran to where he stood, while the one holding the horses moved forward quickly.

What the riders saw were the tracks of two horses that had apparently been hitched at that spot.

The tracks led in a way that showed they had come from the corral of the Pony Riders' own animals.

When their own horses came up the Pony Riders mounted and rode away at a trot, Buffalo Bill leading, while a cheer broke from the crowd standing back in the camps and interestedly observing them.

The Pony Riders soon disappeared from sight, and the men went back to their various occupations about the camps, Alf Slade going to headquarters to await the incoming of the coach with Hart Rathburn on the box, and deeply regretting that he had such sad news to make known to him as the capture of his sister.

That there might be as little delay as possible in starting a second party under Hart Rathburn, to follow on the trail of Buffalo Bill, Alf Slade and Doctor Stevens went over the roll of the men and selected those best fitted to send out as the supporting force.

Chief Slade was determined to make no mistake in a single man, and so they were chosen with the greatest care, not one of them assigned who had fallen under the slightest suspicion of himself, Doctor Stevens or Buffalo Bill.

"It is a good list, sir, and there are just twenty of them," said Doctor Stevens, who, as has been said, besides being the physician of the camps, was also the company's clerk and cashier at the station, and, as Buffalo Bill had refused the position held by Bender, had just been appointed assistant agent of that division.

"We will sound the alarm again, and notify the chosen men as they come, and watch each face as you give him the detail, while I will do the same."

"In little more than an hour the coach is due," said Slade.

As he spoke the clatter of hoofs was heard without, and up to the headquarters cabin dashed Dixie, the Pony Rider.

"Ah, Dixie, what brings you here when it is not your schedule run?" asked Chief Slade.

The Pony Rider appeared to have ridden hard; his horse was fairly staggering as he was led away.

Glancing at the doctor, then about the room to see that no one else was present, he asked:

"Did anything happen here last night, Mr. Slade?"

"Yes."

"Your prisoner was rescued?"

"Yes; but how did you know it?"

Unheeding the question, Dixie went on:

"Was Miss Rathburn kidnapped?"

"Yes, and again I ask how you knew of it?"

"Once more, sir, has a party started in pursuit?"

"Yes, Buffalo Bill and eight men."

"No better man could lead; but he has not enough force, for this pursuit must be pushed to the bitter end."

"Hart Rathburn will be in within an hour, and Doctor Stevens and myself have just picked out twenty men to go under Hart's lead."

"Good! I will go along, for I can do what they cannot. Yes, what Buffalo Bill, even, cannot accomplish," asserted the Pony Rider, with more earnestness than was his wont.

Alf Slade looked at him a moment with surprise, and again asked:

"How did you know about this rescue and capture, Dixie?"

"I cannot tell you now, sir, but I did learn of it, and I have ridden hard to get here, hoping the attempt would not be made until to-night."

"Miss Rathburn has been carried off by the Black Phantoms, and the wounded prisoner was rescued by them, but I do

not wish it known to others that I was aware of it all.

"I'll explain all when I come back, and, my word for it, the days of the Black Phantoms are numbered," averred Dixie, sternly.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE RESERVE.

The alarm was once more sounded from the headquarters, and once again the men came crowding in from the camps, as before.

Alf Slade immediately made known to them that a reserve force was to be sent out of twenty men under the lead of Hart Rathburn; that they would follow on Buffalo Bill's trail and be ready to support the first party, if needed.

For his second party he had picked out twenty men who could be spared, and as their names were called they would step to the front.

Then Doctor Stevens began calling the names of the picked men, and, as each one was named, his face was scanned to see just how he received the news of his selection.

"I think you made no mistake, sir, with any one of them," said Doc Stevens, in a low tone, and Alf Slade responded:

"No, they are all right, I feel sure."

Then he told the detail to get their best horses, to arm thoroughly, procure provisions and be ready at the post when the stage came in.

Hart Rathburn's favorite horse was also ordered saddled and brought up, and, as Dixie, the Pony Rider, seemed determined to be one of the party, a fresh animal was gotten for him, Chief Slade giving him one of his own.

Soon after a dust was spied in the distance, and a cry arose that the coach was coming.

Hart Rathburn was known to always drive at a good pace, but now he was seen to be pushing along at the full speed of his team.

It was also noticed that he had some one on the box near him, and, as the coach drew near, several voices cried out:

"It is Scott Kane!"

The coach came to a sudden halt, and Hart Rathburn called out:

"Mr. Slade, is my sister here?"

"I am sorry to say she is not, Rathburn."

"Ah! I feared it."

"She was kidnapped last night by the Black Phantoms, who also rescued the wounded prisoner."

"Where was Buffalo Bill, sir?"

"He was here in my office conferring with me until near midnight, and only made the discovery when he went to his cabin to turn in for the night."

"Now he has gone on the kidnappers' track with eight Pony Riders, and I have here twenty mounted men for you to lead on after them."

"Oh, thank you, sir. We will start at once."

Rathburn sprang from the box, and walking apart with Alf Slade, he said:

"Scott Kane overtook me, sir, with driver Matt Wright, to say that he had killed a Black Phantom, who, with several others, made an effort to run off the stock at Wild Waters."

"The man lived half an hour after Scott Kane shot him, and before he died told Scott, though he would say nothing to betray his comrades, he did not believe in making war upon women, and it was Captain Kit's intention to rescue the prisoner he knew we had here, and to capture my sister, and it would be done last night or to-night."

"Scott Kane at once came on to Rocky Ridge to tell me, but found I had gone. Matt Wright, who was laid off for that run, gave him a fresh horse and came on with him to overtake me."

"Matt Wright then led his horse back and volunteered to take Kane's place at Wild Waters, while he came on to help me, for you know he is pledged to stand by Buffalo Bill, as I am, also. We three are pledged to each other for life or death."

"Yes, I know, Rathburn, for Buffalo

Bill has told me, and I am glad that Kane has come with you, for I know what a team you three pledged pards will make."

"Now you and Kane get your breakfast and start as soon as you can, and let me tell you that you have, besides the men I picked for you, another splendid ally in Dixie, the Pony Rider. It is my opinion he can be of a great deal of assistance to you."

"I have no doubt of it, sir. I will be ready in a very few minutes."

Going to his sister's cabin Hart Rathburn had his breakfast, Scott Kane being with him, and Alf Slade and Dixie accompanying them.

Boss Betsy served them, but the woman looked pale and anxious, a fact that did not escape the watchful Alf Slade, though the others did not notice it, or if so, thought it was from anxiety about Rita Rathburn.

Breakfast disposed of, and all being ready, Hart Rathburn placed himself at the head of the troop, Scott Kane and Dixie following nearest to him.

They rode at once to the trail left by Buffalo Bill and his special eight, and strated off upon it at a brisk trot, for Rathburn was anxious to lose no time in coming up with the party ahead.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE MASK REMOVED.

When Rita Rathburn discovered that she had been most cleverly, if cruelly, trapped, her presence of mind and nerve did not desert her.

For a moment she felt the shock of her discovery keenly, but it came to her that she was taken for ransom, and that the very act of the outlaws in capturing her would prove their ruin, as she felt assured that Buffalo Bill and her brother would quickly come to her rescue, and with a force that would wipe the detestable Black Phantoms completely out.

So she took her capture with the utmost calmness, and rode quietly along with her captors.

At last they came to another party of horsemen, and she discerned among them the young outlaw who had been wounded and a prisoner, and to see whom, as she believed, she had left her cabin with Jake Ross.

She now realized how cunningly devised had been the scheme for her capture.

Another form in the gang attracted her attention—that of Captain Kit, the outlaw chief.

She had not been very near to him, but she could see that he was a fine form, a splendid horseman, and his men treated him with the respect of soldiers for an officer.

The wounded outlaw was the only one unmasked, and as they rode along Rita observed that he seemed anxious to speak to her.

At last an opportunity offered, and, riding by her side for a moment, he said in a whisper:

"Do not feel bad, miss, for I am your friend."

"Now that Captain Kit has begun to make war upon you, I will no longer serve him."

"Be on the watch for any chance of escape."

He said no more, but rode on, and the ride was continued hour after hour, a guide that knew the country perfectly leading the way.

Counting the outlaws, Rita saw that there were, besides the chief, twelve men, and there was, also, the wounded youth and the traitor, Jake Ross.

A halt was called for an hour during the night for rest; then the ride was continued until dawn, when Rita beheld ahead several men and a large number of horses.

They proved to be seven more of the band of outlaws, and fully a hundred animals, run off from the stations on the Overland trail.

They had been sent by the chief to attack each station and secure the horses. That would give them fresh animals in their retreat, and prevent pursuers from securing remounts.

A couple of hours after sunrise a halt

was ordered for breakfast. To the surprise of all, Rita appeared to really enjoy the meal, and was not in the least cast down.

The chief seemed to keep aloof from her as much as possible, but, at last, gave the order to move on.

Then, to Rita's surprise, three men went on with the horses, while the chief and the rest of his band, nineteen all told, started on foot through a canyon where the hard, rocky soil left no trail.

"I am sorry, but you will have to walk several miles, miss."

"If you break down, I will have a couple of the men carry you, as I suppose they will have to do for the wounded prisoner whom Alf Slade thought he would hang some day."

It was the chief who spoke, and Rita replied, coldly:

"Do not mind me, for I can walk without much fatigue, I assure you."

"The wounded youth you spoke of, however, does need aid, I think."

The chief turned away, and a glance at the youth's pale face caused him to order a blanket swung between two long poles, and the man was carried in it.

The youth accepted this help without a word, and the party pressed on on foot.

After a walk of a mile and a half they came to a mountain.

There the chief again offered aid to Rita to climb, but once more she refused.

It was a hard clamber for her, but the summit of the range was safely reached at last, and a most imposing scene burst upon her vision.

There was a pretty valley set right in the mountain top, a lake with a stream flowing from it down the ridge, and half a dozen cabins were also visible.

To one of these Captain Kit conducted his fair prisoner, and said:

"This is my retreat, miss. To reach here, mounted, is a ride around of forty miles, so I brought you the short cut, on foot.

"Do not expect you will be rescued, for our pursuers will follow the horses, which my men will drive a long way from here to sell.

"Here we have horses when we need them for our work, and here, save the three men who have gone with the animals, all my band is now assembled, as you see, something over a score, for there are a few who remain in camp."

"As to what will be your fate, let me tell you that I know just why you came West—to find your husband and get him into your power, so that you could force him to sign certain papers under threats of carrying him back for trial."

"But let me tell you now that you will not go from here until you sign certain papers that will free your husband of the charges against him, and enable him to enjoy the fortune you can then secure."

"My God! you are Burton Bradford!" cried Rita Rathburn, in a voice of terror.

The man slowly removed his mask, and revealed his face, while he said in a sneering way, and with a malignant look:

"I was Burton Bradford, and I am your husband, Rita."

"I came West, and have seen many ups and downs since then, and your friend, Alf Slade, very nearly ended my life by stringing me up to a tree because he suspected me of being a road-agent."

"Then I was known as Bradley Burton, and I have had another alias—that of Burt Ford; in fact, I have carried a high hand under each name."

"Now I am Captain Kit, chief of the most daring band of outlaws ever on the frontier, and I am making money—we all are."

"There are no traitors in our midst, for I understand human nature, and I have bound them together by an oath not one dare break."

"No matter how wicked a man is, he never forgets his mother, always reveres her memory, and the Black Phantoms take oath of allegiance upon their mothers' honor. This holds them."

"But you look tired, so I will leave you. This is your cabin, so go to rest after your hard night of it, and here you remain."

until you make what vows I demand of you and sign the papers you must sign—or die!"

The man wheeled and walked away, and, a quarter of an hour after, the outlaw youth walked by the cabin and dropped a stone about which was wrapped a piece of paper.

Eagerly Rita took it and read:

"The Phantoms are bound by an oath all must respect, yet when Captain Kit wars against women I feel that the oath is canceled."

"No pursuit is feared, and the men are tired out, so all will be fast asleep as soon as they have had their dinner."

"Yours will be brought to you, and when it is, go into the cabin, dress up in a man's suit you will find there, slip out when all is quiet, and go over the ridge by the way we came."

"I will await you there, for I am not so weak as I made believe."

"If we can get an hour's start I can elude the Phantoms and guide you back to your friends."

"Thank God!" was all that Rita could say.

CHAPTER LXIV.

PLEDGED PARDS AND THEIR TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill and his little band pushed on as rapidly as possible on the trail of the Black Phantoms, but delays were necessary, from time to time, as where Rita had been led into a trap, and at other places where the trail was very faint from the nature of the ground.

The Pony Rider captain wished to make no mistake, so moved cautiously, and his progress, therefore, was necessarily slow.

He saw that the number of horses were double his force, and if the animals all had riders, as was probable, he would have big odds to fight.

But in a good cause he did not hesitate on that account.

It made him, however, the more anxious to make his own trail well, so that Hart Rathburn in following would not be delayed.

At last the party came to the spot where the outlaws had been joined by reinforcements and the stolen horses.

Buffalo Bill at once knew that the stations had been robbed of the animals, and the stock tenders had, perhaps, all been killed.

That a considerable force of outlaws had attacked the stations he felt assured, and these, united with those he was following, caused him to feel that the odds were growing too great for an attack.

Still he decided to push on, and at least see what could be done, hoping that Hart Rathburn and his party would soon overtake him.

Arriving at the spot where the outlaws had camped for breakfast, a halt was made to see what was best to be done.

That the chief had branched off from here, on foot, leaving the horses to be driven on, the ground was to hard to reveal.

But just as they were about to push on after the horses, there was heard the sound of hoofs and into view came Hart Rathburn and his party.

By Hart's side rode Dixie, the Pony Rider, and Buffalo Bill saw Scott Kane close behind them. He could hardly refrain from a shout; the pledged three were together again. Was it for life or death?

As soon as greetings had passed, Dixie said:

"Come! this is the way they have gone, and on foot, the horses having been driven on by a few men."

"Will you trust me to lead you to the Phantoms' camp, Buffalo Bill?"

"Indeed, I will, Dixie, so lead and we follow."

As they pressed on, Dixie said, as he was riding by the side of Buffalo Bill:

"I am going to tell you now that, though a Pony Rider, I am also a Black Phantom! I am in the Government service as a detective and came out here on special work, so I turned outlaw to accomplish it, and thus it is I was able to warn you; learned of the intended capture of

Miss Rathburn, and can now guide you to the retreat of Captain Kit, while I have every man spotted who is one of the band and is, also, in the Overland Company's service—ha! see there!"

As he uttered these words there came into sight what appeared to be two men, but as they drew nearer one was recognized as the escaped outlaw prisoner, Wilber Andrews; the other as Rita Rathburn, in man's attire.

A moment more and the rescuers were gathered around them and heard their story, and Dixie said:

"If we ride on to the foot of the mountain we can climb it on foot and attack the outlaws while they are enjoying their afternoon nap."

"The very thing!" assented Buffalo Bill, and he led the way, under Dixie's guidance, while their horses were left at the foot of the mountain under the charge of Rita and the young outlaw.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

The camp of Captain Kit had not awakened to discover the flight of the fair captive, guided by the young outlaw, and all the men were sleeping soundly, when they were startled by wild yells as the gallant rescuers, led by Buffalo Bill, dashed into their midst.

But why describe a wild and fierce battle, a scene of carnage, for such it was, over two-thirds of the outlaws falling with weapons in their hands, their brave, but wicked chief fighting to the last, when he went down under a shot from Buffalo Bill's revolver, as he refused to surrender.

Then the fight was over, and the victors secured much booty, several scores of horses, and half a dozen prisoners.

From the other side of the ridge Dixie explained that the horses could be headed off, and Buffalo Bill and half his men went in chase, while the rest of the party camped at the outlaw retreat for the night, Rita returning to the chief's cabin and attending the burial of her wicked husband.

The horses were headed off, the men in charge shot down, and then they were driven back to the stations from which they had been taken.

Returning to Julesburg, Buffalo Bill found that Rita had already arrived, and was again in her cabin home, while, when Dixie, the Pony Rider detective had pointed out the traitors he had spotted, there followed a number of executions that Alf Slade was unable to check, and which convinced him that he would have very little more trouble in that camp.

Boss Betsy had not been invited to "levant," but quickly got her belongings together and started for Rocky Ridge with several men who thought it best for their health to also decamp.

Arriving there, they told the news to Bender, and he at once started for other scenes and pastures new, and was not heard of again on the Overland trail.

The Kid, as the young outlaw had been called, took Hart Rathburn's stage for the East, and he told Buffalo Bill he had managed to pick up enough money in the Phantoms' retreat to pay back what his employers had lost by Burton Bradford's robbery of him, and he would tell enough of his story to prove that he was not guilty of the crime of robbing them.

Months after he wrote Buffalo Bill to tell him all was going well with him, and his parents were happy over his return.

Hart Rathburn gave up Pony Riding and went East with his sister, who, proving her husband's death through Richard Dashwood, the detective, once Dixie, the Pony Rider, secured the fortune belonging to her brother and herself without further trouble.

A year after Rita decided that she had met the man whom she really loved, and so she became Mrs. Dashwood, and Doctor Stevens was her husband's best man, for he, too, had given up a wild life on the frontier.

But Scott Kane and Alf Slade still remained on the Overland, while Buffalo Bill

gave up Pony Express riding to enter upon the service of scout for the army. The record he made in that capacity is known to-day the wide world over.

THE END.

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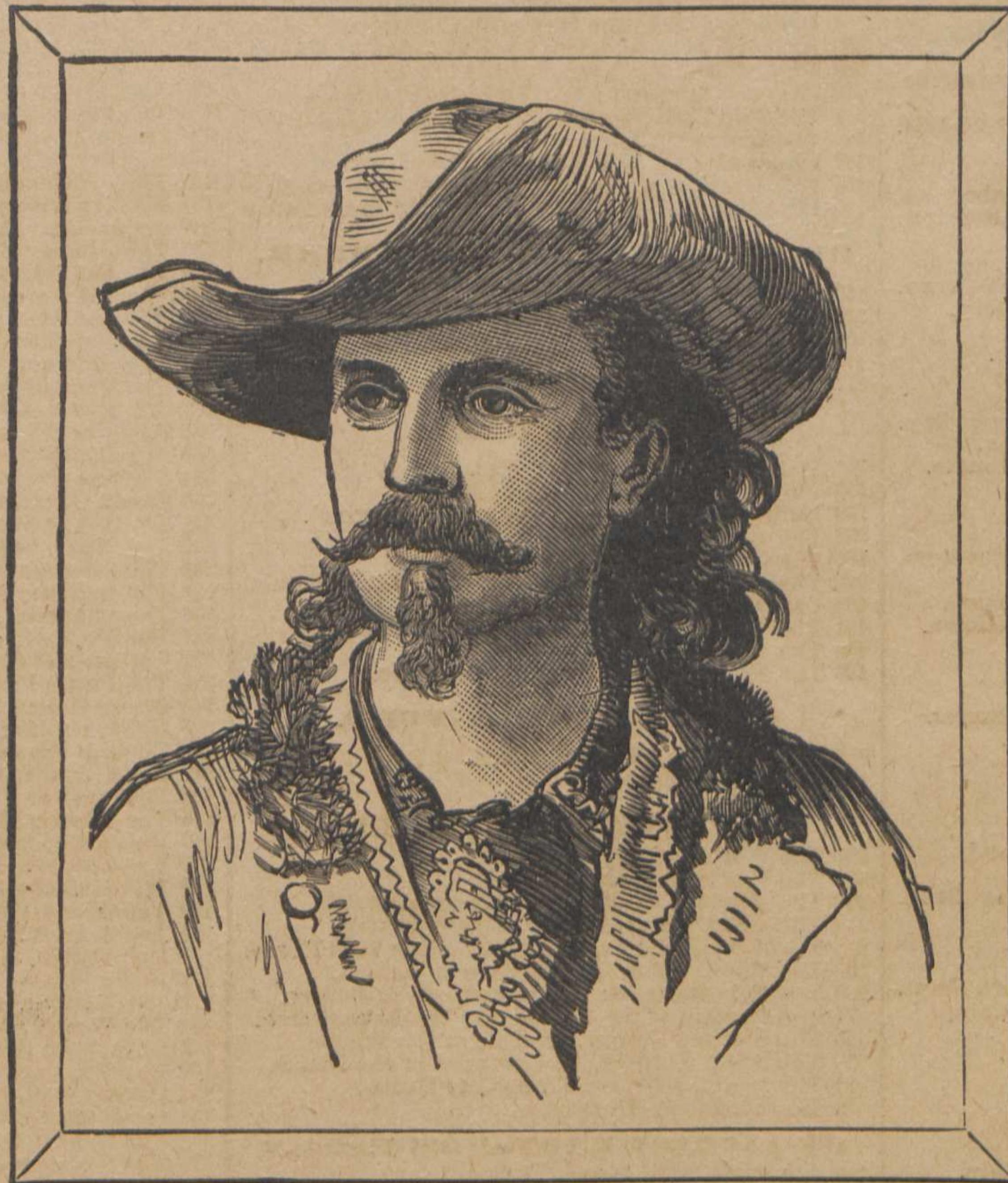
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